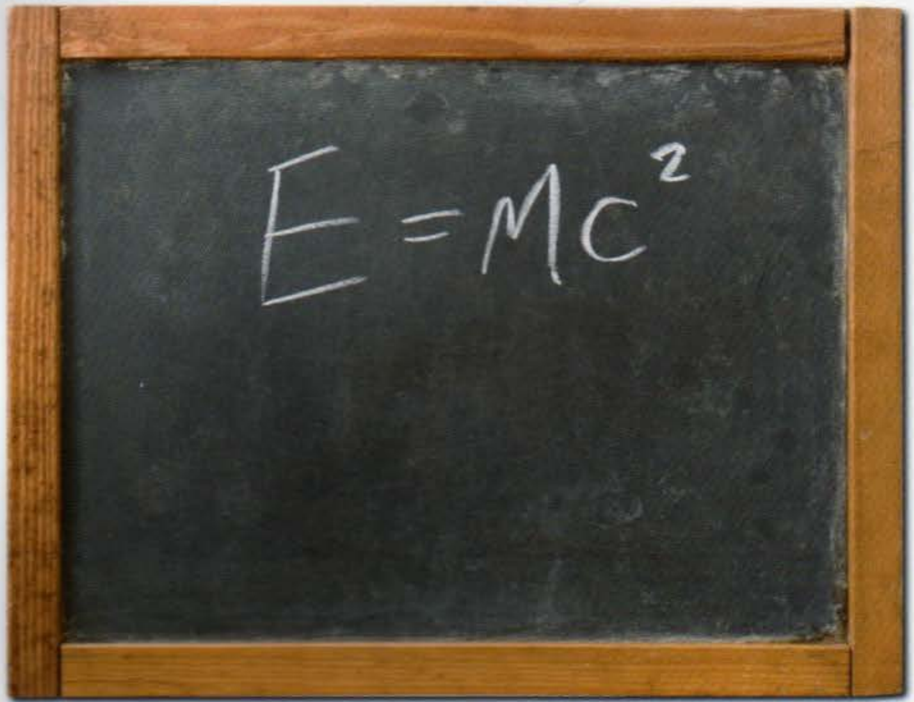
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E=Mc²



There's nothing quite like the pain of a broken promise. It's a feeling every gamer is familiar with, whether you've fallen for it once or a hundred times: seamless environments! destructible terrain! realistic water! Over the last decade, game after game has made the claims and most have disappointed, as well-intentioned developer ambition gives way to technical limitations, time constraints and tightened budgets.

And there's a double bitterness to these let-downs. They don't just taint the games that produced them, they taint the games that aren't yet made – the games that are throwing around the same grand claims, the same enthusiastic ambitions. It's perhaps part of the slight ennui that seems to cloud the new generation of hardware: it may be more powerful than ever, but its software is making the same old promises, banging the same old drums.

But something's about to change. Technology has moved on, game design has evolved. Suddenly, those games that failed to deliver on their promises don't seem like failures, but stepping stones – crucial experiments on the road to success. Suddenly, those promises are becoming real. Play *Fracture* (p66), and rather than rolling your eyes at the old claims about deformable terrain, you're widening them as you bullet-chip stairways out of cliff-faces. Witness *Hydrophobia* (p48) and that yawn provoked by the promise of real fluid dynamics turns into a jaw-drop as torrents boil and sweep around you. Play *Colin McRae: DIRT* (p40) and your boredom about damage models turns to fascination as you bash your Impreza into a needle-nosed concept car. After so many disappointments it's impossible not to be wary, but it seems that the hallmark of the new generation's games is that they're finally ready to make good on the promises of the last. And there's nothing quite like the excitement of a promise finally fulfilled.



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"It's just a bee sting."

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START





INDUSTRY

The blue sky group

Six years after Dreamcast, the sun is shining for Sega Sammy

The last-time Sega made headlines this often was in 2000, when it was losing everything. The underperformance of Dreamcast, the overspend on sales and marketing, the $400 million losses, and the resignation of president Shoichiro Irimajiri signalled dire straits for a company with two other loss makers in its recent history – its amusement arcades and the Saturn.

Headlines over this past year, once again swamped by news of Sega and its unlikely endeavours, have seen something more than the return of Sega's money – its confidence

Then came announcements: Dreamcast discontinued, inventories to be expediently sold, cutbacks to be made, and Sega the platform-holder to be reborn as Sega the platform-agnostic content-provider. Its presence in the videogame software market had slumped to a low of 4.2 per cent; now its goal was to achieve 25 per cent dominance. Its traditional model of recruitment and development was insular and Japanese; now it wanted a world of talent on its payroll.

It's taken more than six years for that new Sega to emerge, still in transition but clearly once again in control. The severest cutbacks – the layoffs of almost a third of its Tokyo workforce in 2001 and the shedding of unprofitable ISP operations SegaNet and Dreamarena in 2002 – helped turn the first profits in three years within a few months. And when arcade giant Sammy acquired all of Sega's stock in 2004, creating holding company Sega Sammy, profits for the year tripled to ¥8.76 billion ($76.9 million or £38 million). But headlines over this past year, once again swamped by news of Sega and its unlikely endeavours, have seen something more than the return of its money – its confidence.

Sega Sammy, like Bandai Namco, is a union built to survive a storm. Totalling over 60 different



companies, its subsidiaries handle far more than just videogames, pachislot machines and arcade halls. Real estate company Recipe, Top One toys (aka Sega Toys), Telecom Animation Films, Sega Sammy Golf Entertainment (owner of Hokkaido's North Country Golf Club) and XYZ Cinemas are all examples, as are operators of Tokyo's popular electronic darts games and venues. Between them, they're theoretically capable of responding to every entertainment trend, anticipated or not, that arises.

And they have to be. The prolonged precariousness of Japan's amusement trade has chequered Sega's past with opposing losses and gains. One announcement might herald the steadiness of its videogame divisions, to cite February's nine-month financial reports, while at the same time noting a 23 per cent drop in profits thanks to the decline of the pachinko machine market, Sammy's once-lucrative monopoly. Meanwhile, Sega's *Ryu Ga Gotoku 2*, a CERO D-rated roaming brawler, ships over 500,000 units and dominates the Japanese charts. DS dating sim *Oshare Majo: Love And Berry* repeats the success and fends off Nintendo's *Jump Ultimate Stars*, and the Wii, a quirky, unapologetically toylike console built on last-generation technology, outsells PS3 three-to-one and conquers the gaming world. You wouldn't like to put money on any one aspect of the industry in which Sega has to invest.

So it's investing in them all. In a bid to exploit the unique growth potential of the Western arcade scene, GameWorks, the arcade chain founded by Sega, Dreamworks and Universal in 1996 and now wholly owned by Sega Sammy, has been reinvented. While Sammy oversees Japan's facilities, managing the ascending IC-card and outgoing (or so it would seem) pachinko markets, GameWorks is exploring the broader entertainment traditionally offered by bowling alleys and leisure complexes. Several sites now feature flatscreen-dominated sports cafes (dubbed Arena Sports Bar & Grill) alongside

Movers and Segas

A who's who of the men who have been at Sega through the ages

The migration of Sega's key players over the years might seem like a game of musical chairs played to the music of Aphex Twin, but it's actually quite intelligible. Departures aside, most of its luminaries continue to work in a similar capacity to the way they did pre-merger, many in the company of their original, albeit renamed, teams.

- **Name: Yu Suzuki**
Works include: *Hang-On* (arcade), *Space Harrier* (arcade), *Virtua Fighter* (arcade), *Daytona USA* (arcade), *Shenmue*
2000: President, AM2
2007: Department manager, New Entertainment R&D 2

- **Name: Toshihiro Nagoshi**
Works include: *Daytona USA* (arcade), *F-Zero GX*, *Super Monkey Ball*, *Ryu Ga Gotoku/Yakuza*
2000: President, AM4 (Amusement Vision)
2007: Department manager, New Entertainment R&D 1

- **Name: Tetsuya Mizuguchi**
Works include: *Sega Rally Championship* (arcade), *Rez*, *Space Channel 5*
2000: President, AM9/UGA
2007: COO, Q! Entertainment

- **Name: Akinori Nishiyama**
Works include: *Phantasy Star*, *Sonic Adventure*, *Sonic Rush*
2000: Designer, Sonic Team
2007: Department manager, Global Entertainment Division R&D 1

- **Name: Yuji Naka**
Works include: *Phantasy Star*, *NiGHTS Into Dreams*, *Sonic Adventure*, *ChuChu Rocket!*
2000: President, Producer, Sonic Team
2007: Chairman, Prope

- **Name: Takashi Iizuka**
Works include: *Sonic & Knuckles*, *NiGHTS Into Dreams*, *Sonic Adventure*, *Sonic The Hedgehog 2007*
2000: Director, Sonic Team
2007: President, Sonic Team USA

- **Name: Makoto Uchida**
Works include: *Altered Beast* (arcade), *Golden Axe* (arcade), *Dynamite Cop* (arcade)
2000: Designer, AM1 (WOW Entertainment)
2007: Department manager, Sega Studio China R&D

- **Name: Mie Kumagai**
Works include: *Virtual On Marz*, *Astro Boy: Omega Factor*, *Virtua Tennis* (arcade)
2000: Producer, AM3/Hitmaker
2007: Department manager, Amusement Software R&D 3



traditional game floors, and parent company Sega Amusements USA continues to trial eastern imports, such as *Mushiking*, in the hope of building its heavily merchandised genre a western audience.

Sega's balance of home and arcade development has been heavily scrutinised ever since Sammy boss **Hajime Satomi**, at the birth of Sega Sammy, voiced a desire to shift Sega's focus from home development to low-cost coin-op manufacture. Sammy's JAMMA-compatible Atomiswave board was to be the platform, and Satomi warned that if Sega didn't capitulate on such key issues then Sammy would buy up a controlling number of shares. "It's true that our original merger proposal was rejected," he told stockholders, "and that some Sega executives have been opposed to the stock acquisition." Whether Rikiya Nakagawa, the chief of arcade subsidiary WOW, who quit a week into the merger, was among them is unknown.

Though it's some way off owning 25 per cent of videogames, those early fears of Sega turning into some kind of super-Sammy have been allayed. Its operating efficiency, meanwhile, has vastly improved. Continued support of its mobile games division and the immediate embrace of Wii's Virtual Console have made a portfolio current that might otherwise be extinct, or worse confined to the ever-lacklustre Sega Ages series. As we went to press, there were 19 of Sega's classic titles on the UK VC, with Sega Mobile resuscitating IP such as







One of Sega's main moves into the mainstream, the adaptation of Philip Pullman's The Golden Compass (there's no sign yet of a return for the UK title Northern Lights) is a multiplatform Goliath. It's also the comeback project for Shiny Entertainment, recovering from both the resignation of founder David Perry and a poor reception to *The Matrix: Path Of Neo*. Has Sega seen the talent beyond the reputation? We'll find out this Christmas



Puyo Puyo, *Wonder Boy* and *Space Harrier*, and a freshly announced wave of Saturn titles heading to online PC subscription service GameTap. Elsewhere, the benefit of having wide-ranging avenues for re-launching franchises is clear. Without *After Burner Climax* in arcades, there might still have been potential for PSP's *After Burner: Black Falcon*, but would there have been the impetus or technology?

Opportunism and insight, not brand-mania and doggedness, define the new Sega. Its 'Sega Loves Your PSP' campaign, launched at a time when few publishers seem to share the sentiment, is a prime example. Of the six titles promoted – *Black Falcon*, *Full Auto 2: Battlelines*, *Virtua Tennis 3*, *Alien Syndrome*, *Crazy Taxi* and *Crush* – five are either ports or franchise revivals.

And *Black Falcon* developer Planet Moon was among several new Sega collaborators ideally chosen for their assignments. Others include urban action/horror maestros Monolith (*Condemned*), and cross-platform wizards Sumo Digital (*OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast*, *Virtua Tennis 2* and *3*). Upcoming titles include *Universe At War: Earth Assault*, by RTS boutique Petroglyph, *Crush*, by Kuju's innovative Zoe Mode outfit, and RPG and FPS games based on the Aliens franchise by Obsidian (*Neverwinter Nights 2*) and Gearbox (*Brothers In Arms*). A freshly announced partnership with comic publisher Marvel includes licensed characters such as Iron Man, Captain America, The Incredible Hulk and Thor, and while a developer has yet to be announced for any associated games, it would follow that an action specialist will land the job.

Not every star of Sega's western expansion has been recruited in such a bespoke manner. Two of its high-profile acquisitions – Creative Assembly in 2004 and Sports Interactive in 2006 – seem better designed to secure certain strongholds in this tumultuous market. Creative's *Total War* and Sports Interactive's *Football Manager* series are both proven, ambitious stars with assured futures and cross-platform potential, as shown by *Spartan: Total Warrior* and upcoming MMO *Football Manager Live*. The third acquisition, of San Francisco-based Secret Level in 2006, seems more an investment in the studio's R&D talents than its portfolio. Prior to the announcement of a *Golden Axe* remake, slated for sometime this year, its resumé included the unremarkable *Karaoke Revolution* and controversial recruitment shooter *America's Army: Rise Of A Soldier*.

The restructuring of Sega's internal studios in late 2003 inspired as much concern as it did intrigue, with many hallowed games seen as pet projects of their creative teams

Yet despite coverage of almost every modern genre, a hole still exists in Sega's catalogue, once filled by second-party studio Visual Concepts. Its sale to 2K Games in 2005 is often tied to Satomi's aggressive stance towards loss makers, and its departure has left little apparent appetite within Sega for further sports sim development. Who shares the outlook is unknown, especially given the dislocation of several voices within the company. The restructuring of Sega's internal studios in late 2003 inspired as much concern as it did intrigue, with many hallowed games seen as pet projects of their creative teams. Behind *Sonic*, *Phantasy Star Online* and *Nights* there was Yuji Naka's Sonic Team; behind *Rez*, *Sega Rally* and *Space Channel 5* was Tetsuya Mizuguchi's UGA, and so it went on.

Put simply, the new 'Sega East' reorganised those studios into three primary divisions, designed



The resurgence of both PC and RTS has inspired *Universe At War: Earth Assault*, developed by Westwood successor Petroglyph. Its Tactical Dynamics system allows units to be retrained over time

Making waves

Often omitted from talk of the AM studios and their fates under Sega Sammy, WaveMaster continues to act as Sega's internal sound design powerhouse. Created by the separation of the internal studios in 2000, as Digital Media, it operates its own publishing, marketing, composition and recording departments, providing audio for games ranging from *Sega Rally 2* to *Sonic Heroes*. Opponents of Sonic's adoption of hair metal as a musical style can twitch their fingers in its direction. Functionally, the studio seems largely untouched by the Sega Sammy merger, also creating audio tools for use by other Sega studios. But notably absent in 2007 is early president Yukifumi Makino, who's since left Sega to become CEO of music publishing and audio engineering subsidiaries at Marvelous Entertainment. It's unknown if his decision was merger-related.



Aspiring to the supersonic pace of *After Burner: Black Falcon*, perhaps, Sniper Studios' *Crazy Taxi: Fare Wars* has taken a major hit to its textures for the sake of speed. It's a noble venture, though the stretched HUD could really use some work





to focus internal talent on key areas of interest. Global Entertainment Software R&D, comprising six departments and headed by Naka prior to his departure last year, handles the bulk of Sega's home console development, though Sonic Team remains notably detached. New Entertainment R&D, headed by former Amusement Vision president Toshihiro Nagoshi and Suzuki, generates fresh IP, such as *Ryu Ga Gotoku*, and games for new technologies, such as Lindberg's *OutRun* and *After Burner Climax*. Amusement Entertainment R&D incorporates the old AM studios, producing games such as *Virtua Fighter 5* for the arcade market, while the Solihull-based Racing Studio handles iterations of series such as *Sega Rally*.

At face value, it looks like very little has really changed, at least when it comes to autership.

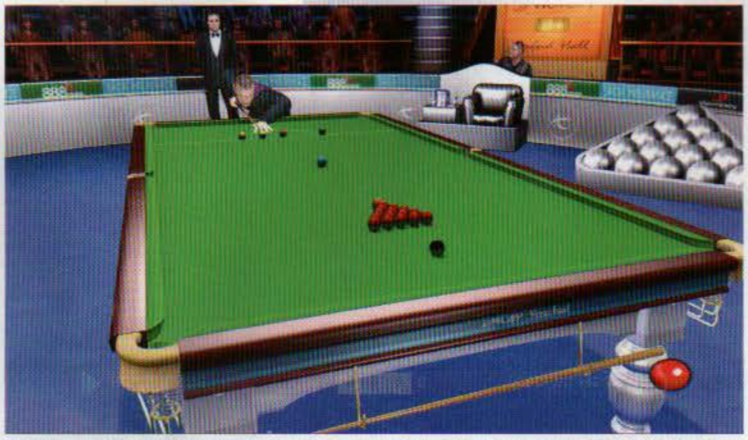
The importance of mascots for new Sega is beyond doubt, but its readiness to exploit the characters hasn't sat well with those who see them as some kind of listed gaming property

Shenmue Online continues its journey to PC under Suzuki, Nagoshi oversaw both *Ryu* games as well as *Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz*, and the forthcoming *Nights: Journey Of Dreams* for Wii is in the hands of the original game's lead designer, Takashi Izuka, albeit at breakaway studio Sonic Team USA. But the merging of UGA with Sonic Team in 2003, which inspired Mizuguchi's departure to form Q!, is a perennial sticking point. And somehow, despite Naka's best intentions (before he himself left to form the Sega-sponsored Prope last year), the world was still treated to the HD rebirth – some would argue re-death – of Sonic.

The importance of mascots for new Sega is beyond doubt – *Sonic Heroes* sold over a million copies in Europe alone – but Sega's readiness to exploit the characters hasn't sat well with those who see them not as the marketing phenomena they clearly are but as some kind of listed gaming property. Good luck to said people, then, as they contemplate *Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games*, a watershed Wii showdown described by SOA president Simon Jeffrey as a move towards the reinvention and reaffirmation of Sonic as a brand. Had Robert De Niro and Al Pacino passed up their opposing roles in Heat and picked Smokey And The Bandit 3 instead, the response from fans would have been similar.

Mario & Sonic could be brilliant, of course. Fans of WOW's Friday night favourite *Sports Jam* will





The collapse of the Sega Sports brand has pushed Sega to the periphery of the genre, titles such as *World Snooker Championship 2007* and *Touch Darts* for DS vying for largely uncontested markets. There's little competition in the above screenshot, either, unless sitting behind your chair is a new addition for this year





know the value of a good sports party game, and if these two distant warlords can finally bury the hatchet aptly and charismatically (in each other, in other words) then what better way to bring them together? It might not make a great game every time, but Sega has rediscovered how to make the *right* games. *Mario & Sonic* should arrive in good time for the 2008 Beijing Olympics; *Sega Rally* moved sensibly to Britain following the pitiful *Sega Rally 2005*; *Aliens* is due a renaissance; the PC is thundering; arcades are recapturing a sense of identity. Sega Sammy has it covered.

The exciting unknown is just how far it's prepared to go. Will it seek revenge on EA for the outcome of *NFL2K3* versus *Madden 2003*, a thrashing so severe as to drop Sega of America's profit forecasts by 70 per cent and prompt then-president Peter Moore to resign? Will it start flexing its increased purchasing power and honour a plan, voiced by marketing vice president Charles Bellfield in 2002, to start buying the competition? Publicly traded companies with strong teams and game franchise rights were identified as candidates – only EA was ruled out. One thing seems certain: it won't be looking back.

Speaking in October, Sega Europe boss **Mike Hayes** predicted the acquisition of "two or three" more studios to finally complete Sega's Western portfolio, although nothing official has yet been announced. "Who they would be and when that will happen is based on the market and the opportunities that arrive," he said, "so we're constantly on the lookout."

Movie tie-in *Charlotte's Web* raised eyebrows with its uncommon play to the kids market, especially among those still clinging to Sonic's chequerboard past. It arrived this year for DS, GBA and PC

Newswire

Human Head up in flames

The development studio responsible for *Prey* and *Rune* was the unfortunate victim of a fire on Friday 20 April which consumed the back portion of its building and did damage in the region of $750,000. No injuries were reported. The Madison, Wisconsin, based firm, located inside a converted railway roundhouse, was able to salvage some computers from the remains of its offices, which were partly protected by a firewall. However, the extent of smoke damage remains to be discovered at the time of writing, and it's hard to know how severely this will delay Human Head's development schedule. The cause of the fire is as yet unknown.



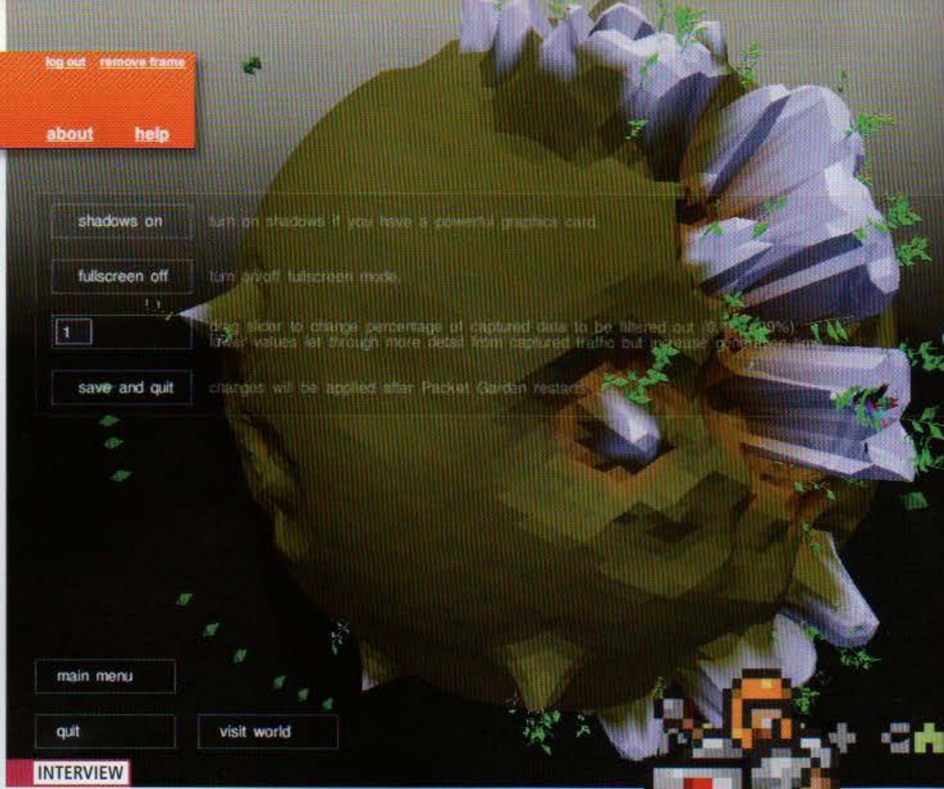
Making tracks

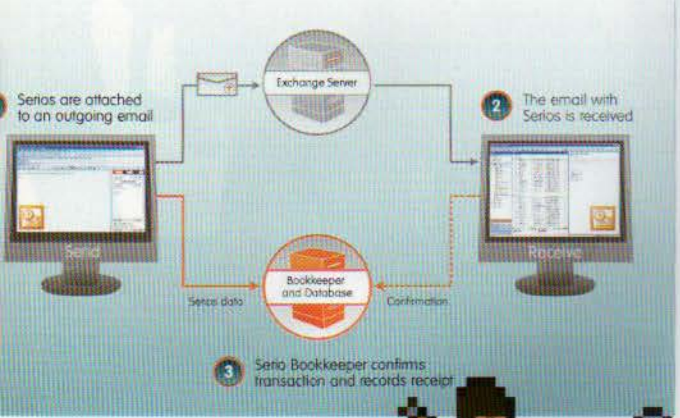
Sega's Midlands-based studio is reinventing an arcade icon

Based in Solihull and founded by Sega in 2005, the Sega Racing Studio describes its job as "reinventing legendary Sega properties as well as developing completely original game ideas." For now at least, its focus is on the former, thanks to the next-gen rebirth of *Sega Rally* (see E173). Its business model is unique. A single Core Technology group provides engines and tools for up to three surrounding game teams. Though also unique in being a Sega-manufactured UK studio, it faces the same predicament as many within Sega Sammy: how to create faithfully arcadey Sega titles without the benefit of an arcade platform. Set to appear on 360, PS3 and PC, its track deformation features hope to exploit technology that Sega's current arcade board, Lindbergh, would have trouble imitating.



The nature of Justin Hall's passively multiplayer online game means that there's not much to look at, but the above status bar gives you a flavour of how it all works







INTERVIEW

Playing passive



What if sending emails and buying new shoes could level you up?

Games can be difficult, requiring hours of hard work and financial investment in hardware and software. But what if you could play them passively? What if your day-to-day activities – the emails you send, the web pages you visit, the items you buy or the journeys you make – became the inputs for a game, rather than joypad-presses and mouse-clicks?

Justin Hall, a graduate student at the University of Southern California's Interactive Media Division, is collaborating on a passively multiplayer online game. It's a Firefox extension that monitors your web-browsing and rewards you with experience, levels and items to encourage greater web literacy among its players. Why does he think passive gaming is important, and what does he see as its pitfalls?

Can you explain a bit about the game?

Passively multiplayer online games look at the collision of personal data and gaming and take a small slice to work on: web surfing. All of the pages on the web are a vast data source, a sort of infinite playing field. So that's our game design challenge – how to parse what you surf, and how you participate in web pages, into a character profile and skills and tools and currency and items and so forth. We're anchored in RPGs for our design, because they attempt to keep a record of character history, growth and development in a character profile. We believe it will be fun to see a rich profile of your web-surfing character take shape. Is your character you? Somewhat, sometimes. But sometimes it's just someone playing a game.

How do you respond to concerns that turning real-life activities into a game could be dangerous – that it might change people's behaviour for the worse?

These are meaty questions. In fact, you've put your finger on a number of the concerns we have – making a game out of everything is great, because I don't have time to play *World Of WarCraft*, but wouldn't it be nice to level up for anything I do? I spend so much time on the computer, I want XP for that – even if I'm not stabbing small mammals and collecting pelts for a dwarf somewhere. What if the game was complex enough to map to what all my online activities were? Levelling up in email, in web browsing. What if that game continued offline? Levelling up in exercise? Or relationships? Or kindness?

It starts to get a little scary, or capitalistic perhaps: 'Sorry I can't talk to you, my talking-to-journalists score is too high this week already.' Quantification could quickly become insane, driven by my own fondness for videogames and my desire to have a HUD for daily living!

Points are potentially evil – someone who contributed canned foods to a food bank before might stop and say: 'Am I getting points for this?' We now have loads of standardised testing in the United States for young kids and I wonder sometimes, are they learning to score high or to think thoroughly? Perhaps those are incompatible – independent thought versus externally structured goals with rich feedback. Still, there are folks who use pedometers to force themselves to get a certain doctor-recommended level of exercise each day, and that's probably fantastic.

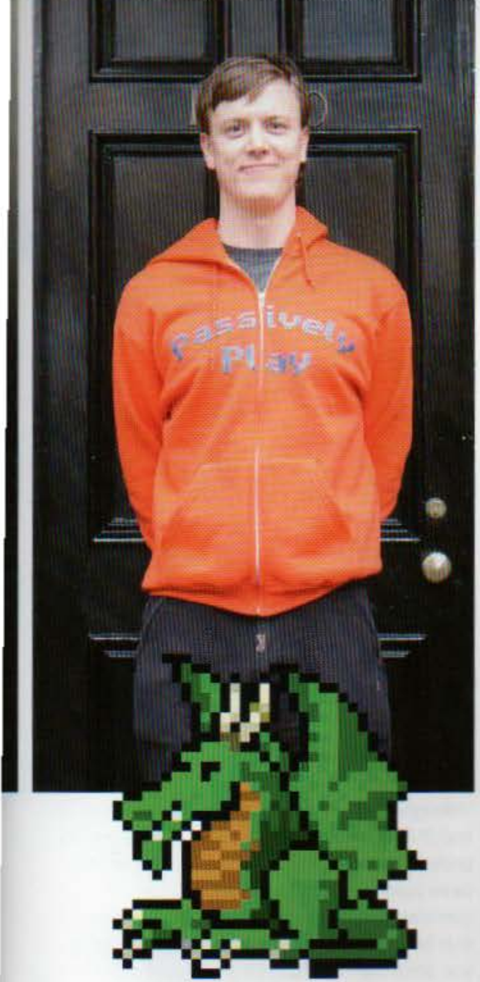
Newswire



Abertay, meet EA

Student game contest Dare to be Digital's growth continues with a new centre in the south-east: EA is offering the use of its Guildford studio. As with the other centres in Dundee and Belfast, it will host four teams of five students from June to August while they construct a game prototype.

While it's great to see Dare expanding, a more financial and less advisory role for big game companies may make encouraging innovation more difficult. Having said that, any investment in gaming's grassroots has to be applauded, and the games can be seen, played and voted on at Dare Protoplay from 12-14 August in Edinburgh.





Hall cites other projects like *Itty Bitty RPG* (above), *Packet Garden* (middle left), and *Seriosity* (far left) as comparisons for PMOGs, based on the way they encourage and reward virtual activities

Why do you think this project is important? What do you say to people who think it sounds like academic noodling?

We're increasingly surrounded by data clouds. It's both fun and important to make those data clouds visible, so we know what information we are sloughing off, and so we can take control of our data. Nothing's better than playing, and games gently give people a chance to experiment with information manipulation.

This is a good time to begin experimenting with games built on our personal data, because as the data piles grow, we should establish players' rights, users' rights. I have the right to see my data, own my data, parse my data, play with it, exchange it, or delete it. 'Play with my data' is an important right, because it will help all of us understand identity and permanence in the wildly expanding stores of electronic human history.

Plus, it should be fun to live in these data clouds; if all our information is purely a marketing profile, how can we joke or pretend or flirt or interpret? We want to see more human-to-human uses of data trails. Using them to communicate begins to make explicit the kind of 'presentation of self in online society' that we see on MySpace and other social networks. We may soon be surfing something because we want our friends to know we're looking at it.

These ideas have potential in the workplace. How well do you think game mechanics are understood as a motivational tool?

There are some attempts to bring MMO dynamics into the workplace, and it makes immediate sense: watch a high-level raid group in *World of WarCraft* and you'll see a small team organised to solve fake problems. It's not a far leap to see 'the workers of tomorrow' expecting the realtime HUDs from MMOs for their work environment: 'What are my co-workers doing right now? What is their health or energy or attention level? What problems are coming my way? Where is my nearest ally?'

But realtime feedback on group problem-solving could be problematic, because we're used to being able to hide our distractions, to take breaks and chit-chat, to sneak in side-projects on the job. What if we could see realtime visualisations of the tasks each of us were undertaking? And the people we were each talking to? Right now we rely on human cues, conversation, gesture, to fill the gaps in our printed charts. Who's powerful? Who's on the rise? Do we really want games to track our 'level' and 'top eight friends' in the workplace? There had better be a spirit of charity and co-operation as games meet work, or else we'll see a sad perversion of the pleasure that comes from play.

If this style of game catches on, do you think work will ultimately become indistinguishable from play?

That's the ultimate problem we have with a deep design of PMOG: the pleasure of most videogames comes from satisfying tangible objectives. Saving the world, freeing the princess, reaching the high score. But life doesn't have clear metrics.

Good passive games will need to balance ambiguity and shifting metrics with clear rewards and a sense of progress. In life, you progress enough to be successful, perhaps spawn, and then your body starts failing and then your mind and then you die. I guess it's sorta like reaching level 60 and realising that's all there is. If you believe in god(s), maybe that's the equivalent of an expansion pack. Otherwise, we can play infinite games while we live, but then eventually we all do die. I want to play as much as possible before that time! So why not build in games to as much of life as we can? Computers and networks make that possible, obvious, inevitable.

Socrates famously decried the impact of writing on memory. How will scores, HUDs, progress bars, health meters, gold coins, levels, skills and raid parties layered over life affect our relationships and productivity? It sounds potentially terrible but also quite exciting.

"There had better be a spirit of charity and co-operation as games meet work, otherwise we'll see a sad perversion of the pleasure that comes from play"

OUT THERE



SCISSOR, PAPER, PWN



It looks like fan-art is becoming chic again, thanks to the efforts of funky collectives such as I Am 8-Bit (whose work you can see in Edge Presents The Art of Videogames). It's difficult not to be charmed by the idea of recreating the digital in much lower-tech media, and the juxtaposition of gaming tropes with their real-world counterparts highlights how endearingly odd certain conceits are. An overworked pen drawing of Mario adorning a toilet seat (as seen on eBay) might make you wonder about the bright green pipes he descends.

The Paper Art Gadgets blog goes one step further, recreating not games, but miniature replicas of the consoles themselves. A recent post details the process of turning a few sheets of card into a three-inch-high Xbox 360 and a similarly scaled HD DVD drive. Do they really need a reason?

• paperartgadgets.blogspot.com



Packet Garden creates a landscape based on your web browsing habits. It's not a giant leap to imagine it as a level generator for something like *Darwinia*





SOFTWARE

Reviewing the ratings

The BBFC has found in a new study that it may have been classifying videogames too harshly



Doom (above) is perhaps the most famous controversial game after rumours linked it to Columbine high school massacre shooter Eric Harris, who had made levels for the game



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Art based on games is increasingly common, and online familiarity breeds contempt after yet another anime Cloud Strife waving his big sword. It's a refreshing change, then, to come across 2D Forever, the website of Tom Waterhouse. The illustrations are extensive and range from Bomberman looking confusedly at a humanoid Bomberman (it has to be seen really) to Solid Snake aging between *Metal Gear Solids*, as well as several non-gaming images.

The sheer verve of the pictures means you can easily forgive the odd typo and the slightly clunky navigation, especially when each comes with a snippet of textual insight that ranges from funny and irreverent to profound.

Site:
2D Forever
URL:
http://www.2dforever.com

The tragic events at Virginia Tech have once again caused critics to cast suspicion at videogames for possible links with violent behaviour. But a new British Board of Film Classification study into why people play games has confirmed that the relationship between depictions of violence and interactivity are more complex than such critics might assume.

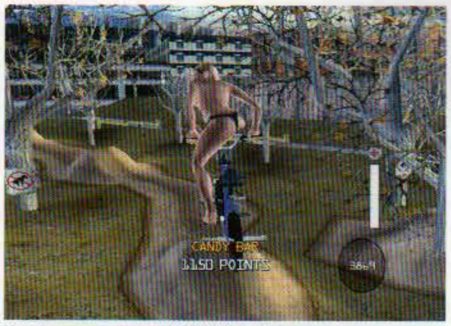
We spoke with BBFC spokesman **Sue Clark** about the project and how it will affect the way it will classify games.

Why did you conduct this research?

We haven't reviewed the way we look at videogames since we started classifying them under the Video Recordings Act in 1984. Over the last couple of years we've seen a significant increase in games coming to us, because games distributors would rather have a BBFC than a PEGI rating, or because modern games have more video clips, or simply because there are more games out there. So we thought it would be useful to see how we should look at videogames and whether we're looking at them correctly, and wanted some research to feed into that.

What was the thinking behind basing it on interviews with gamers?

Well, if you want to know why people play games you have to ask the people who play them, and this is research that people haven't done before. Nobody has actually sat down to ask why people play them, what they get out of playing them and whether or not they think games influence them.



Sex in games, such as in *BMX XXX*, is a less common occurrence than violence, a good thing if it's handled as clumsily as above



Manhunt, a game with a BBFC 18 rating that was removed from shelves after being linked to a murder, still holds first place in terms of its graphic violence and sadistic killing that can blind critics to its humour and commentary on the use of violence

What are the principles by which videogames are currently classified?

Videogames carry the same classifications that film and DVD do. The idea behind that is that people understand those ratings. They also follow the same guidelines except for the additional consideration of interactivity. The assumption is that because you are interacting with the game you are more involved, and that's always been our position. In the past it has meant we were coming down harder on games than film.

Has the research affected this view?

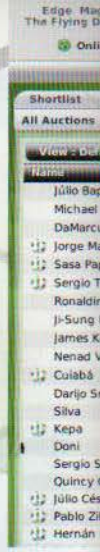
Part of what we were looking for was whether the interactive element actually makes a difference, and if it did, which way. But it has actually shown the exact opposite. Because you have to interact, it allows you to distance yourself from the game activity. If you take your thumbs away from the button the game stops, but a film continues playing and you're carried along with it until you actively walk away or switch it off. So you're constantly reminded a game is a game.

Will this finding change the way you look at games?

We will bear it in mind when we will sit down and look at the way we classify them. So if we've given a game a high rating before, we will review whether it needs that rating. But we're in the early stages of the process.

The way you look at games rather contrasts with mainstream media.

Well yes, that's because we play them. We employ examiners that are games players, and they play each title for up to five hours, using cheat codes to access everything. So the decision we reach is based on as much information as possible. It's classification that's probably unique, certainly in Europe. And we're sympathetic – we know what the attraction is, and we believe the work should reach the target audience. We're not in the business of saying 'no', we're in the business of setting the appropriate rating.



SOUND BYTES

"It's so sad. These massacre chasers – they're worse than ambulance chasers. They're waiting for these things to happen so they can jump on their soapbox."
Jason Della Roca of IGDA in an MSNBC interview, on Jack Thompson's response to the shooting at Virginia Tech

"This jackass who would say to you and the American people that I'm chasing an ambulance – I've sat in rooms with people whose loved ones are now in the ground. I'm trying to save lives and I'm not going to be embarrassed about it."
Jack Thompson's unusually restrained response to Jason Della Roca's response to his response

"Last time, I wrote about why, after decades of enjoyment, I have come to hate fantasy role-playing games (RPGs for short). The kind people at popular website Slashdot linked to it, and a lot of people read it. Many people left comments, most of which said in great detail what an idiot I am. I fed on their hate, and it made me strong.
"Boy. I tell you. If it wasn't for the fact that I am right and they are wrong, I'd be pretty nervous right now."
Exile creator Jeff Vogel returns to the subject of why he hates RPGs on his blog

"We are re-examining our [PS3] budgeting process in terms of pricing and volume. Sales assumptions change and the market is competitive. We are in the midst of revisiting our strategy for the PS3."
Sony president Ryoji Chubachi draws the collective ire of the PRs responsible for drafting the 'no planned price cuts' press statements

SOFTWARE

Back of the 'net

All of history may move toward one great goal, but sometimes just beating your friends is enough

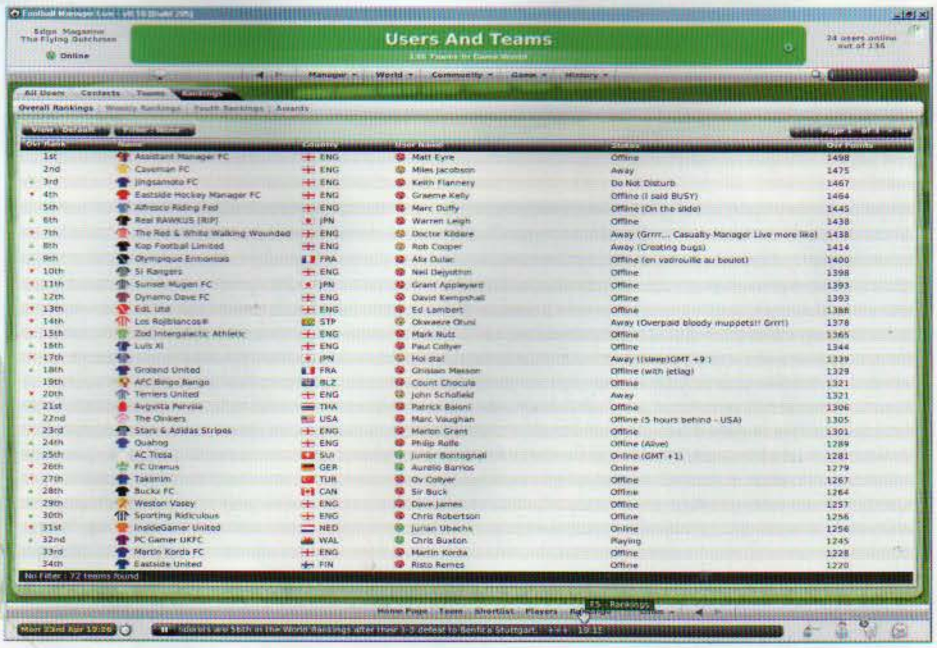
On April 20 Sega made an announcement that will mean imminent divorce for some gamers, but will barely register with others: *Football Manager* is going online as a massively multiplayer online game, with a beta test beginning this month. We spoke to **Miles Jacobson**, the director of developer Sports Interactive Studios, and asked about playing with the beautiful game.



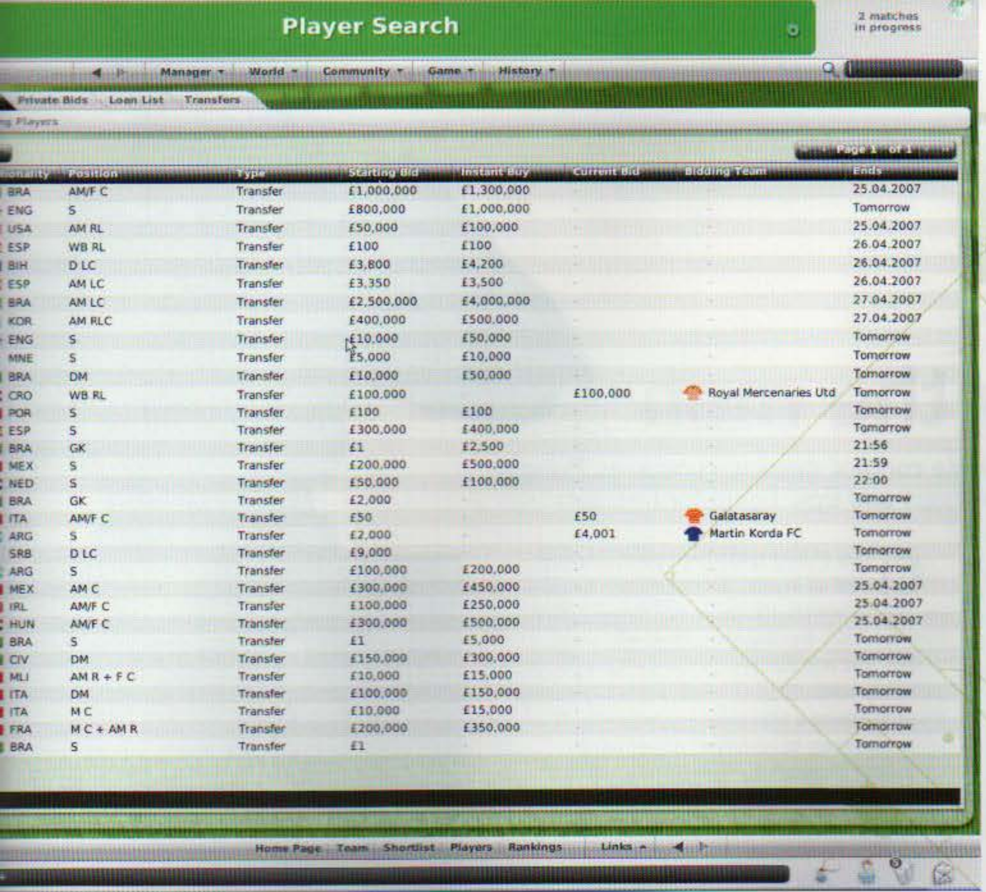
***Football Manager* becoming massively multiplayer online might seem a natural step, but what does it offer that's not already in the series?**
What we've tried to do with *Football Manager Live* is make a game that's more accessible. We want to appeal to people, and perhaps lapsed fans of the series, who would like the chance to play competitively with some mates once or twice a week, as well as to those people who want to play very regularly.

"Creating a framework and letting others run with it is fantastic. People have grown up with games: why not give them the chance to make them the way they want?"

***Football Manager* has always had a community of dedicated fans helping with content – is that social aspect fundamental for *Football Manager Live*?**
Definitely. As more and more people come into the alpha test, it's clear that a core component is having people to help other users starting out, to set up the competitions and to be a part of a



This design of *Football Manager Live* will be instantly familiar to fans of *Football Manager* and its stat-heavy interface. Though it looks forbidding, after a brief tutorial it's second nature to begin setting filter parameters and establishing your standard team line-up



nality	Position	Type	Starting Bid	Instant Buy	Current Bid	Bidding Team	Ends
BRA	AM/F C	Transfer	£1,000,000	£1,300,000			25.04.2007
ENG	S	Transfer	£800,000	£1,000,000			Tomorrow
USA	AM RL	Transfer	£50,000	£100,000			25.04.2007
ESP	WB RL	Transfer	£100	£100			26.04.2007
BIH	D LC	Transfer	£3,800	£4,200			26.04.2007
ESP	AM LC	Transfer	£3,350	£3,500			26.04.2007
BRA	AM LC	Transfer	£2,500,000	£4,000,000			27.04.2007
KOR	AM RLC	Transfer	£400,000	£500,000			27.04.2007
ENG	S	Transfer	£10,000	£50,000			Tomorrow
MNE	S	Transfer	£5,000	£10,000			Tomorrow
BRA	DM	Transfer	£10,000	£50,000			Tomorrow
CRO	WB RL	Transfer	£100,000		£100,000	Royal Mercenaries Utd	Tomorrow
POR	S	Transfer	£100	£100			Tomorrow
ESP	S	Transfer	£300,000	£400,000			Tomorrow
BRA	GK	Transfer	£1	£2,500			21:56
MEX	S	Transfer	£200,000	£500,000			21:59
NED	S	Transfer	£50,000	£100,000			22:00
BRA	GK	Transfer	£2,000				Tomorrow
ITA	AM/F C	Transfer	£50		£50	Galatasaray	Tomorrow
ARG	S	Transfer	£2,000		£4,001	Martin Korda FC	Tomorrow
SRB	D LC	Transfer	£9,000				Tomorrow
ARG	S	Transfer	£100,000	£200,000			Tomorrow
MEX	AM C	Transfer	£300,000	£450,000			25.04.2007
IRL	AM/F C	Transfer	£100,000	£250,000			25.04.2007
HUN	AM/F C	Transfer	£300,000	£500,000			25.04.2007
BRA	S	Transfer	£1	£5,000			Tomorrow
CIV	DM	Transfer	£150,000	£300,000			Tomorrow
MLI	AM R + F C	Transfer	£10,000	£15,000			Tomorrow
ITA	DM	Transfer	£100,000	£150,000			Tomorrow
ITA	M C	Transfer	£10,000	£15,000			Tomorrow
FRA	M C + AM R	Transfer	£200,000	£350,000			Tomorrow
BRA	S	Transfer	£1				Tomorrow

The player search (left) has a level of depth that can mean you spend hours finding that perfect fit, or simply have a quick look for a left-winger with good control, pace and crossing abilities. As for the matches themselves (below), the 2D top-down interface of *Football Manager* remains, with game stats and team tactics easily accessible as well as tweakable options for smoothness such as variable speed, emergency timeouts and, of course, the chat box: essential for mocking those that try to conquer your team of titans



community. And it's one of the reasons that we'll have different types of gameworld for different types of user, because what the *FM* series has taught us is that different people like to play in different ways.

Is there a concern that perhaps some of *FM*'s greatest strengths – the depth of research, the level of detail in things such as youth teams – might be lost in the movement towards a more accessible experience?

If you don't want a youth team, that's fine, but you can have one if you do. Your tactics from *Football Manager* can be imported into *Football Manager Live*, so in terms of team tactics nothing's changed. But you can do what you want within the game using the competition set-up, and that's one of the beauties of user-generated content. Creating a framework then letting other people run with it is a fantastic thing, because people have grown up with games – why not give them the chance to make them the way they want them?



There are superficial similarities with its standalone brethren, but *FML*'s human interaction adds a whole new level of compulsion

What's the argument for *FML* charging a monthly fee – what can subscribers expect to see for their money?

Football Manager Live is a long-term project, and when subscriptions were first mooted we asked ourselves the same questions. We'll offer constant development and updating with new features, and react to users and what they want to see. Our aim is to deliver the best customer service that there's ever been in an online game of any description, because we're focused on making sure our user is happy. That's essential: if you buy *FML* it will be constantly updated, but we won't release expansion packs and charge you. If new features come in, then if you're paying your subscription you'll get it. You'll get everything. I don't think there's such a thing as a free MMO, but what we're trying to do is make it as cost-effective as possible. We're very aware of making it value for money as well as great fun.

In terms of a huge online gameworld with up to 1,000 teams, how do the players balance? After all, there's only one Ronaldo.

In *Football Manager 2007* there are over 5,000 teams. There's still only one Ronaldo. There are a lot of good players around the world, and our database currently contains over 50,000. People are always finding young stars and players from other leagues – and because of the limits on wages, you won't end up with a team of famous superstars, but can build a really, really good team. It's all part of the fun of the game – my only advice would be: don't use auto-select!

To read an extended version of this interview, and for a chance to be a part of Football Manager Live's beta test, visit www.edge-online.com

OUT THERE



MENTAL CASE

We've all seen the neon-industrial case-mods with transparent windows displaying the glowing entrails of the machine, draped with fibre-optic cabling and papered with holograms of skulls wearing gasmasks, etc, ad nauseum. However, one enterprising 'artist', Kasey McMahon, has put together a beast of a machine. Literally. Compubeaver houses an Intel Core 2 Duo processor and a gigabyte of RAM. The corpse of this large water-dwelling rodent makes a more impressive piece of desktop furniture than most beige PC tower cases. An 80mm fan, located above the majestic animal's tail, ensures that components don't overheat within their furry shell. Just don't ask where the USB port is.

● www.yourpsychogirlfriend.com/beav/





SOFTWARE

Pay the man

Downloadable content debacles ensue as Bungie offers new maps and Epic fights for freedom

Critics of Microsoft's micropayment policy were up in arms last month over the decision to charge for additional content from the 360's two heavyweight development studios, Epic and Bungie. Epic, in a magnanimous gesture towards *Gears Of War*'s online community, chose to release a new game mode for free. It seems, however, to have been a hard-fought battle with Microsoft for them to do so, and it was announced with regret that future content, such as the upcoming map pack, would have to be paid for. Previous maps had only been released to the community for free because they had found sponsorship with the Discovery Channel.

"They're trying to build this business model around selling additional content for games," said Epic's founder, **Tim Sweeney**, recently. "It's a valid idea, but there are a lot of good business reasons for releasing free content for games. You want to increase the player base, you want to keep the game alive." Releasing content at a cost can also risk fracturing a community





***Gears Of War*'s new multiplayer mode is not dissimilar to *Unreal Tournament*'s Domination gametype, in which players fight to maintain possession of a number of nodes, gaining points for the length of time they remain in their possession**



Making the new maps available on the original Xbox means you can't use Marketplace to purchase them, even on the 360, so you have to enter your credit card details via the game's interface

between the people who have chosen to purchase it and those who have not.

It's a risk that Bungie has decided to face, however, charging the nominal fee of $4 (£2) for two new *Halo 2* maps. Originally planned as a 360 exclusive, a carrot to tempt diehard Xbox fans on to the new console, the two maps were released on April 17 for either console, avoiding the need to split the matchmaking playlist in two. However, since April 24, the maps have been integrated into matchmaking, meaning without them *Halo 2* fans will simply not be able to play, except in custom games.

"There are a lot of good business reasons for releasing free content for games. You want to increase the player base, you want to keep the game alive"

However, it's perhaps fairer to judge this latter decision in the light of Bungie's continuing generosity in supporting a game from 2004 at all. Four dollars is a piffling amount to pay, and though the 'death by a thousand cuts' argument is often bandied about in relation to micropayments, Bungie's releases have been rare and substantial. And making the release free after a few months should take a little of the sting out of the initial charge – an idea that Epic, too, has adopted for its future releases.

It's also wise to consider the effect of free content on other developers. While not in direct competition with franchises such as *Gears*, titles that rely on premium content as a source of revenue, such as those appearing on Live Arcade, begin to look like gluttons in the light of Epic's generosity – a company that can afford to be generous. Microsoft is faced with a complex issue in appeasing the needs of those developing for its console while making their marketplace an attractive place to do business.



The two new *Halo 2* maps, Tombstone and Desolation, are actually re-envisioned maps from the original *Halo*, Hang 'Em High and Derelict, respectively. They're not simply ports though; the changes are substantial enough that many players might not recognise them



PS2 still rules the roost

Old tech still triumphs as sales of PS3 rise slowly





Sony's PS2 continues to sell well despite heavyweight competition, boosted by high-profile games such as *God Of War II*

With stock shortages being the only cap on Wii sales, which shifted 259,000 units in America during March, it seemed there was a winner amongst the latest console generation. The truth is, however, that all three were losers; it was Sony's last-generation machine that came out on top, with US sales in the region of 280,000 – over twice the number of PS3s sold in the same period.

Although up by two per cent over previous months, Sony blamed the relatively slow PS3 sales on the European launch: 'We continued to find ourselves supply constrained in March due primarily to the shift in manufacturing focus to the PS3 PAL version to support the launch of the system in Europe' it said in a statement that raised some eyebrows, contradicting anecdotal suggestions of a glut of unsold hardware. But Sony's disappointment about initial sales will surely be mitigated by its planned ten-year lifespan for the console, which obviates the need for high sales early on – as the continuing success of the PS2 might be seen to support.

Of course, all home console sales were dwarfed by the DS – with Nintendo reporting a 90% sales surge over the last fiscal year, shortly after Sony announced a price-cut for the PSP. Easy comparisons are not altogether fair, however: the PSP doesn't sell to the same demographic as the DS, and the price-cut might easily be to make space for the recently confirmed – but still undated – new model.

Continue

Folding
PS3 tackles disease! Next stop: world hunger

Shining
Even if the sun is too bright for outdoor DS-ing

Singing
Why is it so hard to shake the tunes you hate?

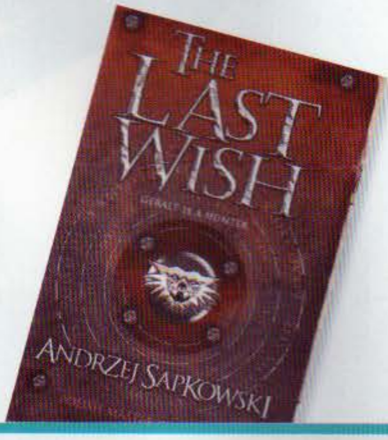
Quit

Fascia facists
Just why do plain pieces of plastic raise such ire?

eBay
Too many bargain hunters, not enough bargains

Time travel
Why can't everyone just use GMT?

Author: Andrzej Sapkowski
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 978 0 575 07783 6



THE LAST WISH

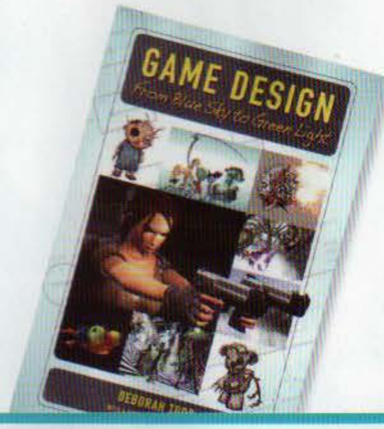
Cynical monster-hunter The Witcher stalks in English for the first time

The books-on-which-games-are-based bandwagon continues to pick up pace. Following on from last month's re-release of *Stalker*-source Roadside Picnic, more Eastern European inspiration arrives in the shape of a first English translation of Polish fantasy author Andrzej Sapkowski; a world which receives its game homage in CD Projekt's *The Witcher*.

A collection of short stories, with a linked underlying theme, The Last Wish concerns the doings of monster-hunter Geralt. Raised from childhood as one of the mysterious Witchers, Geralt walks a lonely road, being paid to kill the monsters that inhabit the medieval villages and castles of Sapkowski's Tolkienesque landscapes. Yet his world is much more morally ambiguous than Middle-earth. Shunned almost as much as the creatures he kills by the people who ask for his help, Geralt slowly realises he's becoming his own nemesis. "The better you are at your job, the less job you have to do," points out his friend Dandilion the poet.

And it's this world-weariness, combined with his battle-honed powers, that make Geralt such an interesting character. He's not invincible, as the wounds from his encounter with the striga demonstrate, and it's his sharp wits, as much as his silver sword, that keep him alive. And it's also combined with a gleam in his eye for the ladies, and those who merely take women's form. Here's hoping The Last Wish is merely the opening chapter in his English language adventures.

Author: Deborah Todd
Publisher: AK Peters
ISBN: 978 1 56881 318 9



GAME DESIGN: FROM BLUE SKY TO GREEN LIGHT

Dip your brain in the deep waters of game brainstorming and design

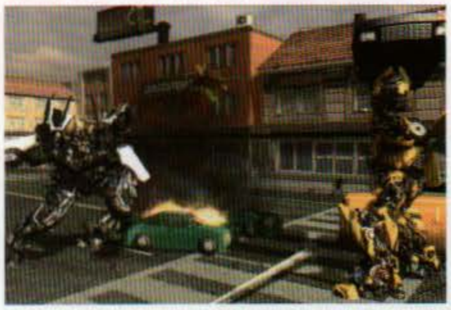
Most contentious of all game development disciplines, design remains the one role many people in the industry consider can't be taught. Maybe someone should warn the hundreds of students who annually enrol on game design courses. In such a context, it seems a little harsh to point out that despite its title, this isn't the book to turn novice wannabes into useful practitioners. Nevertheless, it is one of the better books that's been published about some of the processes involved in game development. Part of the reason is Deborah Todd's decision to take an anecdotal rather than a procedural approach. Combined with some pacy, intelligent writing and clean design, the overall package works well. Herself a veteran designer, writer and production with over 15 years of experience, Todd also has the industry contacts to provide insight into the ways different companies approach tasks such as brainstorming, level design, focus testing and pitching. Those helping out include's id's Tim Willits, Silicon Knights' Denis Dyack, Nihilist's Rob Huebner and Backbone's Chris Charla, each of whom talks in a reasonable amount of detail about how specific projects have been approached. Another good resource are the end-of-chapter exercises – not rocket science, they do provide opportunities to ponder some of the disciplines discussed. And despite some chapters tailing off into slabs of talking head quotations, this provides a good overview of subjects such as design, story and characterisation.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Transformers

FORMAT: 360, DS, PC, PS2, PS3, PSP, Wii **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION



Autobots! Throw something! If Activision's all-singing, all-format version of Michael Bay's movie isn't a bonanza of button combos and vehicle tosses we'll be stunned. Traveller's Tales is developer

Sins Of A Solar Empire

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** STARDOCK



Having invented what developer Ironclad calls the 'RT4X' genre, blending epic space strategy with close tactical combat, *Sins* is offering pre-order beta access in advance of its August release

Nights: Journey Of Dreams

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



A journey of courage, hope and inspiration, says Sega. The hope here is that Wii gets itself another bona fide *game* to join *Super Paper Mario*, not a gimmick, party prop or technical experiment

Harvey Birdman Attorney At Law

FORMAT: PS2, PSP **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



As *Phoenix Wright* tops the charts in Japan, Capcom encourages further legal action by adaptating this Adult Swim cartoon. Each level is a self-contained interactive story, if you can believe that

Obscure II

FORMAT: PC, PS2, Wii **PUBLISHER:** PLAYLOGIC



The discovery of a "beautiful but strange plant" sets up a sequel to 2004's teen horror. The original's co-op mode is back but its giant enemy crab has since moved on to bigger and better things

Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



The Udon-sketched backdrops look a damn sight better than the hardware-scaled sprites, but PSN and Live users shouldn't moan: Udon's next is a complete 1080p redux of *Super Street Fighter II*

Lost Planet: Extreme Condition

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



PC becomes the most powerful console on this planet as Capcom unveils an unlikely port. Expect improved textures, richer lighting, higher resolutions and hotly contentious mouse-driven controls

Wipeout Pulse

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** SCEE



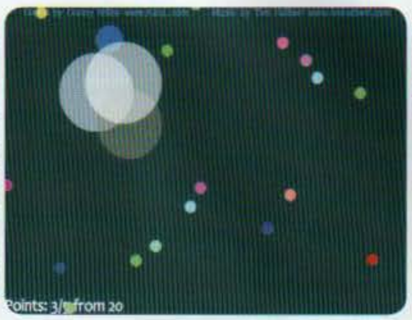
The Mag-Strip is *Wipeout's* latest leap of science, the sequel to one of PSP's best games introducing loop-the-loops and vertical plunges. Not quite so *Pure*, then, but as mind-bending as ever

Beautiful Katamari

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** BANDAI NAMCO



The loading times shrink as the game world explodes. Online play features in both versions, though visual comparisons should be quite academic; neither looks any more radical than you'd expect



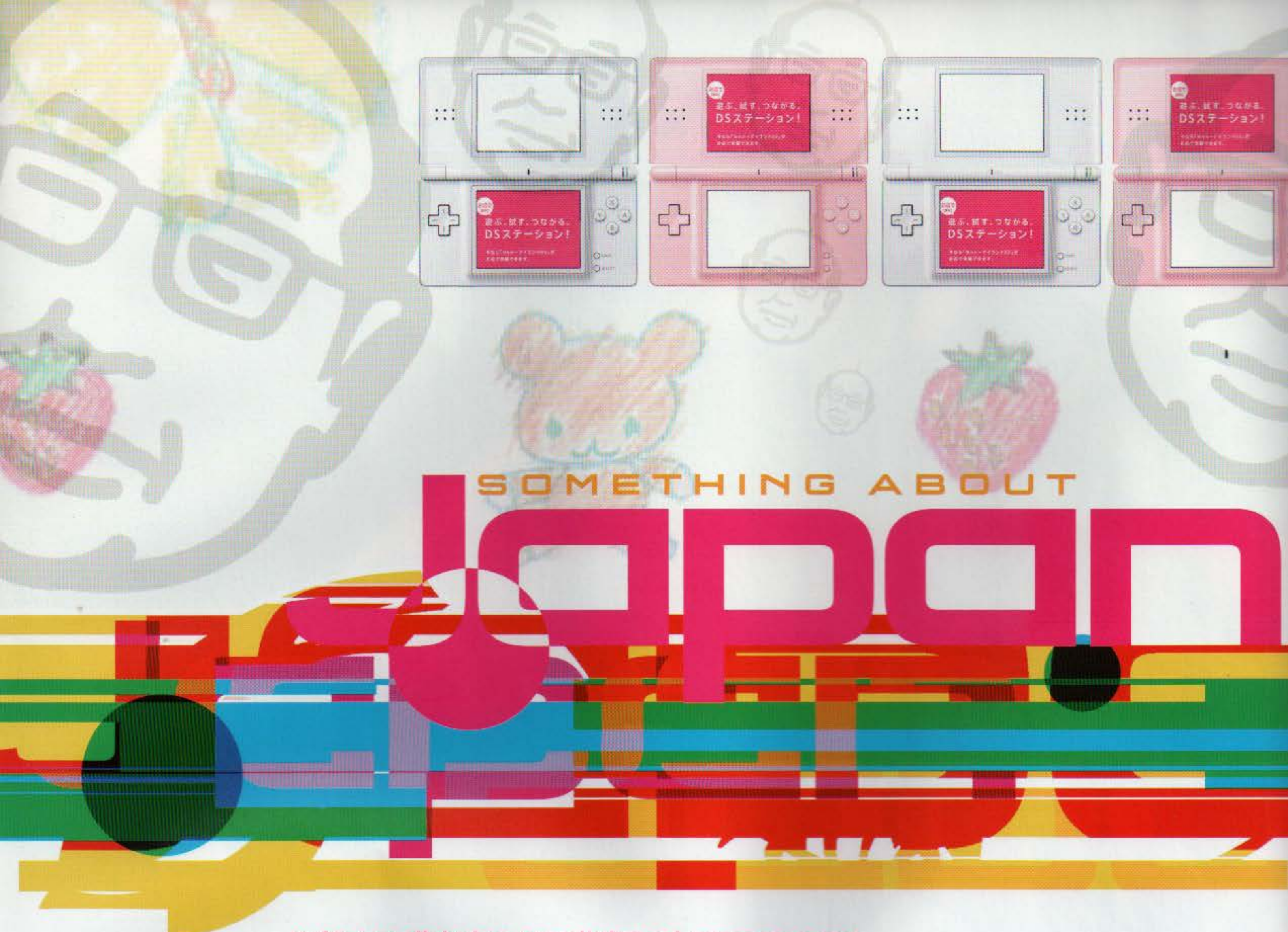
INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Boomshine

http://www.kongregate.com/games/k2xl/boomshine

One of the early stars of Flash game portal Kongregate, *Boomshine* is tranquil, pretty, stimulating and elegant – almost everything you wouldn't expect from a game with the word 'boom' in the title. The premise is simple. A fixed number of coloured dots bounce around the screen. You have at your disposal one detonation, which swells to a circle before quickly shrinking away. Any dots that hit that explosion will swell themselves, setting off a potential chain reaction, and your task is to detonate enough of them.

The pleasure comes from the process of tracking the trajectory of the dots – the zen rule of thumb is that it's best to click where they aren't rather than where they are – and in the aesthetics. There's a hint of *Electroplankton* in the way each dot chimes a different note as it blooms, and the overlapping pastel disks are continually pleasing. But the satisfaction isn't just skin-deep: Kongregate diverts some of its ad revenue back to the game-makers, so a lunch hour spent on this really is feel-good gaming at its best.



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Where did the traditional games go?

An anonymous ex-pat developer considers Japan's move toward 'non-games'

Are Japanese gamers really turning their backs on more traditional videogames?

One of the pleasures of being an ex-pat in a different gaming culture is thinking of what old friends and colleagues have to suffer with the same old, same old. Whereas UK gamers will have a summer focused on wringing the last dregs from the admittedly fine games of spring and the festive period, and awaiting autumn for the next AAA titles, in Japan the beginning of the summer season is also the time for the Golden Week of national holidays – from greenery day to constitution memorial day – that coincides with a traditional sales spike in the industry and many new games. Let us eat cake!

The DS alone will see over 20 titles, but fighting for space with the guaranteed gold of *Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings* and the more traditional *Tetris Attack DS* are several games in the new puzzling and tuition genres: the likes of *DS Business Manner*, which teaches you the way to behave properly in formal situations, to *I Did It! Mama!*, a simple touch game designed for younger gamers and coming in both boys' and girls' varieties. It's not a DS-exclusive trend either: Wii owners will have to decide between *Super Paper Mario* and *Gentle Brain Exercises*, while the PS2 sees another host of karaoke, music and quiz titles.

It's a growing trend, and the last year has seen a great deal of debate, and even concern, amongst gamers about whether traditional styles of game are being sidelined by publishers in favour of this so-called 'non-game' phenomenon.

The last year has seen a great deal of debate, and even concern, amongst gamers about whether traditional styles of game are being sidelined by publishers in favour of this so-called 'non-game' phenomenon

The good news for these worried gamers is that Japan doesn't seem to be forsaking traditional gaming to accommodate its new obsession with cooking titles and *Wii Sports*. Since the launch of *Blue Dragon*, even the historically overlooked 360 has seen a (relatively) large improvement in sales, and titles like *Gears Of War* and *Lost Planet* have even finally seen Xbox Live beginning to catch on. The latest in the series of *Phoenix Wright* courtroom adventures recently stormed the DS charts, and it's very common to travel to work of a morning and see as many commuters enthusiastically playing *Monster Hunter* as brain training themselves. If nothing else, it's a deal more soothing than a sea of newspapers.

But despite this many retailers, possibly in an attempt to make the traditional gamer more comfortable, have sectioned off 'adult game' sections (a term that, for these wholesome purposes, refers to the brain training, manner teaching and cooking software), which keeps the middle-aged woman playing *Animal Crossing* over the free wifi hotspot away from the technology evangelist hovering around the PS3s.

But this is less of a cynical separation than it might seem: more like keeping the rock CDs away from the classical CDs, and vice-versa, than enforcing hierarchies of gamer. As the industry matures and moves towards this more accessible and, hopefully, customer-oriented approach it should be welcomed by us all. After all, in Japan as elsewhere the first generations to grow up with



home console and portable games are getting older, with responsibilities that rarely dovetail with marathon sessions on the latest RPG. Older gamers won't forget or forsake older genres, of course, but the latter must survive alongside the new gaming tastes that are borne out of lifestyle requirements. And while it must have been surprising for specialist game retailers, so tailored to their equally specialised audience, to see octogenarians dragging their grandchildren in to point out the 'proper games' amongst the racks of shooters and RPGs, now the market seems to be settling into a much more comfortable state.

Elements of the traditional remain in the sense that the launch of *Final Fantasy XII*'s first DS spin-off is still guaranteed to bring in more yen than *Choco-Dog's Sweet Department Store*. But there's a new and complementary state where parents are going into a games store to buy a puzzle game collection or *Mr Tights' Manners* for themselves, rather than just something anonymous with Gundam in the title to keep the kids quiet over the holiday. Gaming – it's becoming fun for all the family.

Brick Bardo is away





The high-calorie adventures of Choco-Dog are the perfect standard bearer for the changes that the enormous success of the DS has wrought on Japanese gaming

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

The Club



Can the score attack-heads at Bizarre Creations reinvent the thirdperson shooter with this pinball-influenced 'beat 'em up with guns'? Finding out looks fun
360, PS3, PC, SEGA

Pokémon Diamond/Pearl



New strategies, online battling, new monsters to catch and the same old ball to put them in! But why make us wait until the end of June, Nintendo? We'll only import it
DS, NINTENDO

Nights: Journey Of Dreams



It should be a natural fit for the Wii Remote, and it's high time there was a sequel. So please, please, please don't mess this one up (and see Time Extend, page 94)
Wii, SEGA

Material worlds

Physics gets more pervasive



Fracture's geo-modding will offer a huge new set of tactics for enemies and environmental challenges. But how deep will its freedoms go?

Physics are growing up. No longer content to invest the odd crate here and barrel there with physical properties, games are applying them more broadly to create more cohesive and dynamic worlds to play in.

It's not hard to understand the allure of such closely simulated environments. *Half-Life 2* might have animated some of the objects that occupied its world, but they still remained essentially separate from it. They would roll across its slick surfaces, leaving little trace of their passage and reminding us that for all City 17's aesthetic richness it was still a film set, a facade to frame the action and storyline.

This month we've seen three games that are attempting to give more life to the worlds in which they're played. *Fracture* will allow its environment to be torn apart with an array of ground-shaping weaponry. *Hydrophobia*'s world might be a little more static, but it introduces a whole new substance to games: water, with the power to wash the player, and every other loose object, away with it. And *Colin McRae: DIRT* features cars and trackside objects that are splattered with mud, and that deform and break with mesmerising fidelity.

These new features promise to give players' actions greater meaning. A car becomes a record of a race, a history told through a torn fence ribbon caught in the wheel arch, a buckled door panel and a caved-in front. A trail of tectonic upheaval, or tidemarks and scattered flotsam, become paths of progress through *Fracture* and *Hydrophobia*. They might still be fundamentally ephemeral, gone once the player has moved on, but until then dynamic environments such as these offer chances for interaction beyond fixed geometry. They offer the promise of more engaging and evolving scenarios.

That's if, of course, developers can make them work. Six years ago, *Red Faction* illustrated the problems of allowing players to destroy the game environment by heavily restricting where they could do it. And *Hydrophobia* will have to show that water, which might be dynamic but isn't very interactive, can provide more than creeping tension or awful, rushing panic.

And don't we, sometimes, want a shallow world? One in which we don't have to be so creative, where our hands are held and we can enjoy the sights without having to get so involved?

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **TURN 10**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **JUNE**

Forza Motorsport 2

Microsoft goes for evolution rather than revolution with an update to its driving sim



It's been dubbed Microsoft's answer to *Gran Turismo*, but 2005's *Forza Motorsport* always trod its own path through the console racing sim field. Packed with well-implemented, thoughtful ideas, it gained an enthusiastic following for its simulation-heavy yet lively racing style. Through helpful features such as braking lines that faded in from transparent to red depending on corner entry speeds and driving aids that didn't neuter handling into boring submission, the *Forza* experience was deep yet welcoming.

Fans will therefore be pleased that *Forza Motorsport 2* is more an update than a reimagining of its predecessor's template. The braking lines return untouched, as do lap time penalties for dinks, damage and off-track excursions. The focus is once again on encouraging realistic behaviour from its players, even if damage modelling is forgiving – a full-speed crash won't incapacitate your ride on the normal damage setting (but certainly will in 'simulation' mode), and in-pack jostling will rarely throw it into a spin.

Car model damage is dramatic but not as detailed as that found in *Colin McRae: DIRT* (see page 34). However, bumpers and wing mirrors will hang and fall off to remain as debris on the track for the rest of the race.

Just to drive home the point that this is a simulation game, there's an in-race telemetry option for those aiming to tweak settings



Forza 2's physics model makes even the lowest class with all driving aids activated feel skittish and nuanced. Visual, aural and rumble feedback is responsive and refined so it's easy to feel confident about what each wheel's doing. Though the steady and fast framerate – a great improvement over its predecessor's – has a lot to do with it, much of this achievement is down to the superlative sound design, which captures engine roars, throbs and rattles.





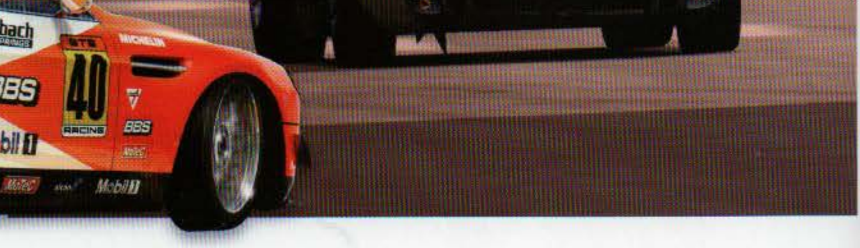
The photo-taking utility is practically identical to the one in *PGR 3* (above), while the visual damage modelling can be pretty, but is somewhat limited in scope (above left)

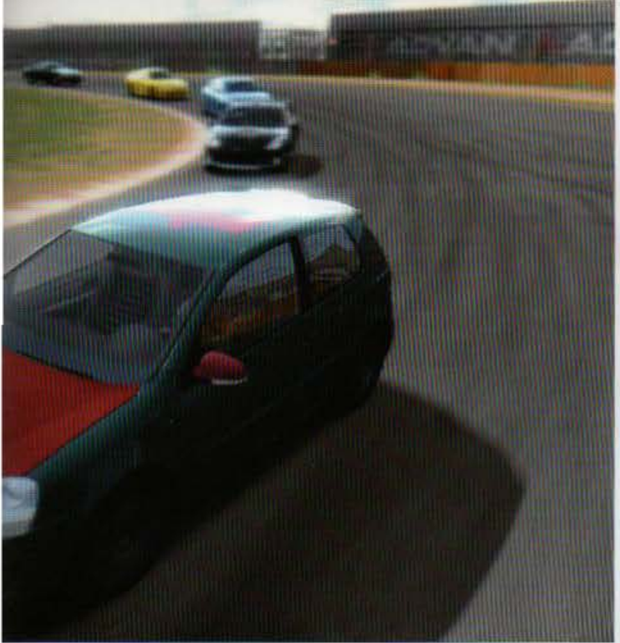
And just to drive home the point that this is a simulation game at heart, there's an in-race telemetry option, which brings up detailed figures on suspension and wheel settings, tyre heat and g-forces, for those aiming to tweak car settings to perfection.

Driver and car experience levels, which influence access to and discounts for car manufacturers, models and upgrades, also return. The original *Forza*'s respectable roster of 231 cars has been boosted to 310, and each one can be customised through tuning, bodywork and decal design. *Forza 2* offers a greater range of bodywork options and an expanded decal design tool, which supports more than 4,000 layers of paint for each car.

It's the customisation options that best expose *Forza 2*'s main development from its original outing. Players are able to trade their handcrafted cars in an online marketplace for in-game currency, and the cars also feature persistent owner histories and stats. The depth of the decal system means that particularly creative designers won't need to also master the technicalities of tuning to amass their fortunes.









Lower car class races capture the thrill of bumper-to-bumper driving, and all the dangers such proximity brings. The risk of time penalties for hitting other racers is a good deterrent





The Drivatar feature from the first Forza has been cut from its successor. Instead, you can employ several AI drivers to drive for you

Other than by selling or giving cars away, Turn 10 has provided a couple more places to show off objects of pride. Naturally there's online racing, which supports a version of clans, called car clubs, to shield players against online irritants, with 12 players per race. Much of the online experience has benefited from what Microsoft has learned from *PGR 3*.

Indeed, *PGR*'s developer, Bizarre Creations, has also lent *Forza* another way of showing off treasured cars – its photo-taking kit. Working in almost exactly the same way as it did in *PGR 3*, and with the same imaging options, the photo-taking option is available whenever a race is paused. Players are also able to display and download their pictures from *Forza*'s website, just as they could from *PGR*'s.

The singleplayer game, comprising Career and Arcade modes, is complete but little to shout about. The Career mode is the usual earn-and-buy-slog through events specific to car and player level. Arcade includes an unlock-slog through 15 one-off exhibition races, and there are 25 time trials with predefined cars.

With the continued absence of a rival simulation-based racer on consoles, *Forza 2* will probably stand proud. Its careful renewal instead of reinvention might not preach to anyone but those already converted to the genre's charms, but it's doubtful it'll get anything wrong in the process.





Many of the tracks from the original game return, including the banked corners of the Nürburgring (pictured here), Silverstone and Laguna Seca



Livery aid

Forza 2's decal system is far expanded from its original incarnation. A standard range of shapes can be applied with a series of effects – shading, resizing, stretching, spinning – to over 4,000 paint layers on a car. One thousand layers can be applied to each of the two side panels, plus the bonnet, boot and roof, with 500 to each bumper and 100 to the wing. The system promises to be flexible enough to ensure players can create some remarkable paint jobs.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

Medal Of Honor: Airborne

A new perspective for EA's troubled series, where things are looking up as well as down



No quantum leap, *Airborne* still takes just about everything familiar to *Medal Of Honor* up a notch. Weapons and POV bob differently when running, crouching and zooming, and the ragdoll physics are more convincing





The perpetual decline of *Medal Of Honor* must be one of EA's most nagging itches. Since *Allied Assault* stormed the beach at Normandy, the series has been reduced with every campaign, as if that one moment of morbid homage (more to Saving Private Ryan than the veterans of D-Day) was fading away like tinnitus. Put simply, the series shot its bolt five years ago and has laboured ever since.

But as **Patrick Gilmore**, the producer of this latest version explains, *Medal Of Honor: Airborne* is more than just the next casualty: "When I first came back to Electronic Arts, I really didn't want to be involved, but as we started talking about the airborne concept I realised there was still some meat there. The franchise *had* become generic World War 2 and it was really exciting to be able, once again, to focus it on something."

A level in *Medal Of Honor: Airborne*, like any another, is just a box full of objects, people and structures with a fake horizon wrapped around it. But here you spawn above it rather than within, your parachute mobile enough to reach any rooftop, alleyway or town square without ever overshooting the map. Allied and Axis troops, of which there are hundreds, fight over dynamically drawn battle-lines that immediately pose a dilemma: do you head straight for an objective and into the lion's den (suicidal), or do you find a quieter entry point for a more subtle, tactical assault (moderately suicidal)?

"When we proposed the non-linear approach, the first reaction from a lot of the designers was: 'We can't manage it'," says Gilmore. "They were still thinking in terms of scripting and you just can't script all of this. So we started to use real-world methods of controlling the battlefield, levels of threat that mean you can't just bum-rush enemy strongholds, and we realised that actually there's a lot of inherent structure in what we're trying to do."

"No, *Airborne* will not have an adrenaline meter," laughs Gilmore. "It's not going to make up something to layer on top of the gameplay. That's artificial; it creates a fake veneer over the experience. I have a low tolerance of that kind of thing"

Do you head straight for an objective and into the lion's den (suicidal), or do you find a quieter entry point for a more subtle, tactical assault (moderately suicidal)?

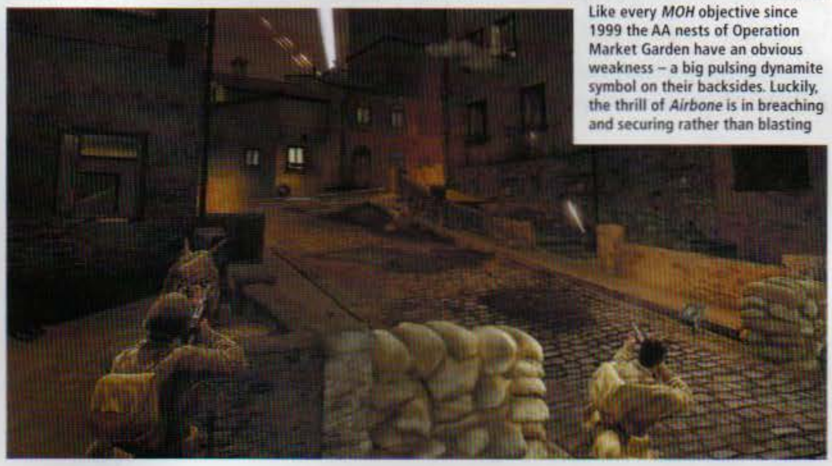


***Airborne*'s tone is as conflicted as that of any post-Saving Private Ryan shooter. Missions might begin with solemn prose and screaming, but they sure perk up once the bullets start flying. Helmets ping high into the air with every headshot, the HUD exulting every standout kill**

There's a lot that's familiar as well. The iron sight of a Thompson submachine gun has become such a symbol of *MOH*'s routine that to see it in *Airborne* is to despair. But there's a twist to the action this time. Introduced by the recent *Medal Of Honor: Vanguard*, *Airborne* uses analogue postural controls to keep you out of harm's way. They're an excellent, intuitive feature. You clutch the trigger and hold the stick downwards to crouch, teasing it left and right for varying degrees of lean. *Vanguard* had featured its own airdrops, too, but







Like every *MOH* objective since 1999 the AA nests of Operation Market Garden have an obvious weakness – a big pulsing dynamite symbol on their backsides. Luckily, the thrill of *Airbone* is in breaching and securing rather than blasting



The big one

In Operation Market Garden, Churchill's attempt to prize open Nazi Germany with one epic airdrop, *Airborne* has found its own Omaha Beach. Planes replace boats, flak batteries replace fortified howitzers, and once again only a handful of allied troops survive the assault.

The game's Operation Neptune levels will still touch upon D-Day itself, while Operation Varsity takes it through to the war's end. The climax will be a siege of the infamous flak towers surrounding Berlin, giant anti-aircraft blockhouses that made its skies impenetrable. Each mission will, as always, have its own introductory words of wisdom from Ben Franklin and others, the unifying theme being the capacity of ordinary men to achieve extraordinary things.

Gilmore denies its use was some form of test bed for this.

"*Vanguard* and *Airborne* share similar themes because they were in development at the same time," he says, "but *Vanguard* was made to leverage the European Assault engine, which was actually very linear. It was more a bubble-type game, all battlefield-chokepoint-battlefield-chokepoint. It had more open spaces and more enemies than previous *Medal Of Honors* but as a designer you still knew that the player was coming across this or that bridge before the game could open up, so the flow was still from A to B. It was one of our production phases for *Airborne* to ensure that the battle fights well in a single direction, and another to ensure it fights well in every conceivable direction."

Airborne's AI systems, which Gilmore describes as crafty enough to dramatically prolong the life of a virtual soldier, were inspired by those of *FEAR*. But if they've reached that game's standard, they're yet to prove it in action. *FEAR* was an intimate combat environment, full of tense and coherent standoffs; *Airborne* is something else entirely. You couldn't accuse its maps of overpopulation – this is war, after all, not The A-Team – but the sheer number of troops leaves little room for ebbs and flows, which is a shame. The demo level has one volume and one pace: ear-splitting and frenetic. Great if you want to simulate shellshock, not so great for drama or the head.

There'll be some downtime, at least, during the swish in-engine cut-scenes and briefings. And surprisingly, Gilmore doesn't duck the question of whether anyone actually cares about *Medal Of Honor*'s nondescript characters, who never used to be this prominent: "That used to worry me but it doesn't any more; you just realise the need to give personal stakes to all of this. On a side note, for a long time there was this feeling that Hollywood could get involved in videogames, that it knew how to tell stories. And whenever someone whose primary background involved making movies came in, they'd dictate everything on those terms. So defensiveness sprung up within gaming with people saying 'no, it's about gameplay and not about that story stuff.' But we're through that now. The industry's matured and a lot of our competitors have started to embrace storytelling for the role it should properly serve in videogames."

So the politics are settling down while *Medal Of Honor*, excitingly enough, is not. *Airborne* isn't likely to have the same impact as *Allied Assault*, which has only itself to blame for triggering such an arms race within the genre. Attention spans and eardrums have suffered far too much for another onslaught to do much damage. But this is a different game, a progressive game, and a difficult one to get right. So in that sense it isn't what the series used to be, but what it needs to be.





Airborne's textures and lighting stand up to all kinds of scrutiny. Shader and post-processing effects ensure that the odd grubby texture blends in, an efficient new engine drawing high levels of detail at the greatest distances. At present, though, there's a notable lack of destructibility to the game's environments





Many games rely on the horizon to excite visual interest, but *DIRT*'s tracks have been recreated with a sense of authenticity that allows them to remain visually engaging even when the tree-line closes in around the road

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2007**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E167, E171**

Colin McRae: DIRT

Current generation consoles finally get a taste of serious rallying – or do they?

An enduring problem of the racing simulation is how to stand out from the pack once the maximum graphical fidelity for that generation of technology is matched by all contenders. Whereas *Forza* has pursued user-generated content as a means of extending the life of the game, other titles, such as the *TOCA* series, have moved away from specialisation, in the hope that cramming as many different types of motorsport into one game as possible will attract a broader audience.

The *Colin McRae* franchise has always had the advantage over other racing games of offering an innately different experience; its emphasis on point-to-point racing setting it apart from the direct competition and repetitious lap-count of most motorsport simulators. Nonetheless, recent iterations have seen it distance itself from its original singular focus on rally racing, introducing a wider range of off-road vehicles and sports, and, with *DIRT*, Codemasters has created a more accessible experience that consciously avoids the often unforgiving realism of previous games.

The rally modes are now equalled in number by side-by-side races. It is in these events that the move away from realism is most palpable; certainly, the Rally Raid mode, which sees multiple opponents vie for position, encourages a degree of bumper-to-bumper jostling that would not be tolerated by a more strictly accurate damage model.





It's a good job that *DIRT* veers away from the severe realism of its predecessors – your opponents are never reluctant to trade paint with you, and so races would be over pretty quickly if the odd shunt totaled your car

Even in the solo events, you can plough through a fair amount of scenery before your vehicle is taken out of commission. Compounding this is the introduction of the Championship Off-Road Racing buggies, the energetic handling of which adds a considerable burst of colour and variety.

Underneath the graphical gloss and sprinkling of new features, however, it's apparent that the heart of the game is still the 'just you and the road' rally mode – evidenced by the amount of attention the road itself has been given. The environments are varied, challenging and, as you might expect, beautiful. As you might not expect, however, they also sound fantastic. The noise of grass stems whipping against the mud flaps and gravel peppering the underside of the chassis adds such personality and immersion to the tracks that you never find racing solo to be any less diverting than when racing alongside others.

As a deluge of motoring games threatens to shower down upon us, *DIRT* still dares to be a little different. When most other games make the car the star, *DIRT*'s equal emphasis on the track, almost treating it as a competitor in its own right, might be enough to keep the franchise in contention for pole position.



Vroom with a view

Although the game offers a number of viewing angles, the variables of the surface, suspension and the overall dynamic of the track often make it advantageous to remain in thirdperson – giving you a better sense of vital information: the track ahead, how much clearance you have, and how much your back-end swings out when you attempt to power-slide round a hairpin. The different cameras don't totally go to waste, though – they're all in the cinematic replay, accompanied by uncommonly palatable music. In this one way, at least, *DIRT* really does buck the trend.





As with previous games your co-driver is vital, and here the brusque advice has enough variety that it doesn't grate too much. If only the same could be said for the explanatory voiceovers on the otherwise stunningly slick menu-system









Your tower begins as a bit of a wreck, but the minions swiftly begin restoring some dastardly glory as well as incorporating any sections you find on your travels. The final form will depend on your evil or slightly-less-evil choices throughout the game's story







Overlord

In which the fantasy genre is sent up, and sir plays as an evil badass

It might not look it at first glance, but *Overlord* is almost certainly the spiritual successor to *Pikmin*. The key elements of the game are almost identical, as you control the eponymous evildoer and direct an ever-expanding team of minions to do your bidding – and even the structure shares notable similarities. But *Overlord's* fantasy gameworld and slapstick humour add a level of fun to being bad: after the slight disappointment that was *Evil Genius*, it might finally be time to dust off the scarlet robes, twirl the moustache and practice your best 'mwa-ha-ha-ha' laugh.

Elves, dwarves and the like are very much fictional Marmite, but you can sense that, after the strait-laced fantasy of the *Age Of Wonders* series, Triumph's team is cutting loose and may entrance even dedicated Tolkien-haters with its reworkings of fantasy staples. The game begins with your reawakening years after being defeated by seven typical fantasy heroes, who since their victory have been corrupted by the adulation that followed. Their sins are the seven deadly ones, ranging from a knight's lust to a halfling's gluttony, and each of their surroundings reflects their decline: it's a world where there aren't really any heroes to stand up to you, which raises the interesting prospect of your reign of tyranny being occasionally better than what has gone before. Choices (stay with your loyal and efficient partner or go for her sister?) affect how corrupted you become: sow constant evil and your armour will become black and pointy, your tower a dark engine of doom.

But although the overlord is capable and fun, the stars are the minions: brown fighters, green assassins, blue swimmers and healers and red fire-throwers. You begin with only a few loyal troops, but as your evil grows you can command up to 50, either by moving them as a group or using context-sensitive waypoints. The foes you come up against will require different combinations and tactics: an example shown was a rock giant which the overlord tempted towards himself, before assassins jumped out from hiding and began stabbing it in the back. You can cast various spells to help out, but it's only in dire straits that you'll need to sully your evil hands. And, satisfyingly, after combat or pillaging the minions will pick up gold and lifeforce for you, as well as any weapons or armour their defeated foes have dropped for themselves, from a lady's dress to a halfling's axe.



One of the first upgrades your minions will latch on to is a makeshift pumpkin helmet – funny, but also useful armour against halflings throwing rocks. And, of course, you get to smash up their precious pumpkin patch first

The animation and actions of the little critters are what makes them so appealing: they'll gladly run like lemmings wherever you point, then slay, maim and rob maniacally before returning to you like puppies, making sending them in to kill and rob peasants an absolute pleasure. Naturally, minions have other uses such as rebuilding your dilapidated tower (much like Olimar's ship, sections have to be recovered from around the gameworld) which contains several unique features: special mention to the Jester minion, who follows you around the tower belting out tributes based on your play: "Destroyer of the Elven race! Admirer of fine bosoms! Homewrecker!"

You'll get to be all these things and more, and *Overlord's* world looks a fine playpark. The inclusion of several online modes from one-on-one slaughter to co-op survival should lengthen an already comprehensive singleplayer campaign that is promised to have significant leeway to go with the pleasure of building an evil empire. It won't redefine the genre, but its sense of fun and cabaret sideshows should find it a following beyond the latent evildoers of this world.



Inferno is one of your more dramatic spells, easily decimating peasants' thatched houses: your adoring minions gaze on before chopping down any survivors

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **TRIUMPH STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **NETHERLANDS**
RELEASE: **JUNE**





Sweeping powers

One of the most common commands is 'sweeping', using the right analogue stick to direct your horde through, over and under locations that your larger magnificence can't access. This can range from simple puzzle applications, such as sending minions to wind down a bridge, to large-scale carnage. They respond quickly to your commands, and clamber and scramble over the environment rather than getting stuck in corners or falling off edges. It's key in terms of finding loot and completing tasks – but as with most of the interaction between the overlord and his minions it's more fun to choose a fleeing human for the little guys to chase, or conduct their trashing of a house.



The tracks are varied, littered with dramatically destructible kibble and frequently stunning, although racing demands so much of your attention it's really only possible to admire the visuals during a replay



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **EMPIRE INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **BUGBEAR ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JUNE**

FlatOut Ultimate Carnage

Although practically tailgating last year's *FlatOut 2*, this sequel claims to shift things up a gear

The trajectories of the *Burnout* and *FlatOut* franchises have a satisfying symmetry: just as Criterion's latest offering for PS2 takes *Burnout* back to basics, eschewing the frivolous delights of Crash mode and the pinball physics of traffic-checking, *FlatOut Ultimate Carnage* promises an onslaught of arcade destruction and manic vehicular minigames, propelling the title into the space momentarily vacated by the dominant battle racing series.

Developer Bugbear Entertainment has gone overboard to make the experience a varied one, creating a game stuffed with enough modes and features to cater for both players committed to serious racing and those seeking crash-happy arcade action. However, rather than losing focus in its attempts to be everything to everyone, the game has a robust career option that should ensure satisfaction even if the other modes don't get you revved up.

As with previous *FlatOut* games, there are three vehicle classes to choose from, and within each category a progression of championship cups and voluntary events to play through. However, Bugbear has been careful to avoid making the Career mode too punitive – rather than forcing you to get a medal within each race, completion of a cup is achieved by accruing championship points until you are at least third in the roster of competitors.

The addition of the table also adds a vaguely tactical element, as it's in your interest to single out and eliminate the opponents who have the most points. Each of the 11 AI competitors has a unique identity and driving style, and subtle rubber-banding makes them consistently challenging adversaries, while ensuring that you're never left too far behind the pack.

For those seeking more instant gratification, the quick races give you the opportunity to drop straight into the action, and, of course, the colourful array of arcade modes offer an even more anarchic alternative to the Career mode. The joyfully sadistic Ragdoll Challenge returns in five different flavours, each of which sees your broken, flailing body ejected through the windscreen of your car, with the various objectives of firing it through a set of flaming hoops, or skimming it across the pool like a pebble.

There's also a Destruction Derby mode, now replete with power-ups, and a Challenge mode in which you compete in a mixed mini-tournament of races and arcade game types. Marvellously, each and every game type is available in multiplayer – even Ragdoll Challenge, which sees all the players compete simultaneously, appearing as ghosts on their opponents' screens.

Multiplayer even adds two more modes: a brutal version of tag, called Hunter Derby, and Head-On races, in which you turn around and race the reverse of the track, guaranteeing mayhem as you meet oncoming racers.

Whether or not it can unseat *Burnout*, even temporarily, remains to be seen, but, if nothing else, the latest *FlatOut* instalment looks set to raise the bar in terms of variety and quantity of content.



Happy torque

Sometimes it's the little things that set a game apart, and *Ultimate Carnage* has a slew of crowd-pleasing tweaks that streamline the experience. A reset button allows you to get back into the race almost immediately after a crash, and events can be restarted instantly without the need for extra loads. Hopefully, similar consideration will have gone towards the online lobby system, as the game's unranked and TrueSkill matching will make or break its multiplayer offering.







There's all the attention to graphical fidelity you'd expect from a current-gen game, with parallax mapping creating 3D tyre tracks through mud, and realtime reflections on every surface, from pools of water to spokes on a hubcap



Bugbear has struck a good balance between realism and entertainment: the vehicles plough through the scenery with little effort, but still have heft and solid handling, and the 40 or more deformable parts make for a satisfyingly palpable damage model



FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**

Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles

Capcom departs further from the fixed-camera slow-boiling horror of earlier titles as it mops up the remaining drips and drabs of plot



Cheekily broaching the franchise's taboos, *Umbrella Chronicles* streamlines the settings familiar to players of previous games by letting you blast straight through the doors that used to regularly thwart your progress

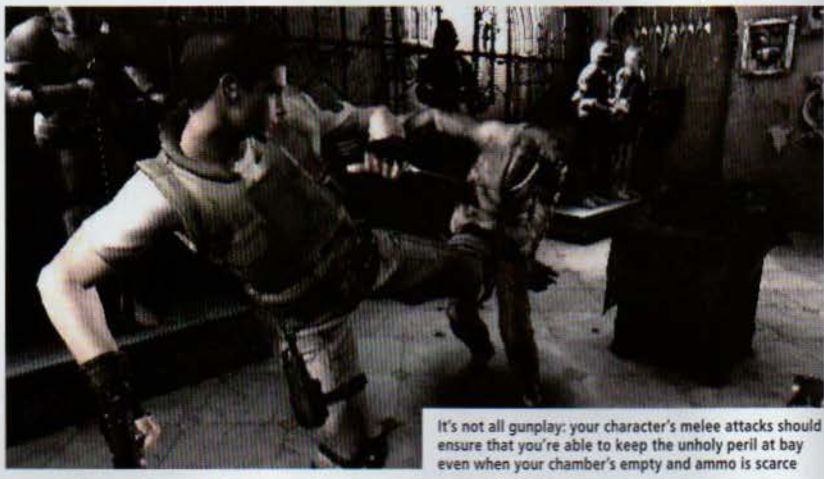




While a few new additions to the game's bestiary are promised, there are going to be a few new additions to your arsenal too

This addition to the *Resident Evil* series may revisit the settings of previous games but, by virtue of the Wii's unique control system, necessarily does more than recycle old material. Originally announced at the Wii's first unveiling, it is only now becoming slightly clearer as to how Capcom will approach revising the franchise for the new system.

The result of that gestation period looks set to be a highly action-oriented firstperson game that on first glance would appear to have more in common with the Playstation's *Resident Evil: Survivor* than other *RE* titles – a game which drew comparisons with *House Of The Dead*. But, although freedom of movement is largely restricted, *Chronicles* distinguishes itself from a straightforward on-rails shooter by the inclusion of various adventure elements familiar to the series, periodically pulling the viewpoint out from firstperson as the character engages in an action set-piece, puzzle or cinematic sequence. And, despite those familiar interactions, there's an iconoclastic edge to the game – not least because



It's not all gunplay: your character's melee attacks should ensure that you're able to keep the unholy peril at bay even when your chamber's empty and ammo is scarce

the time-honoured convention of the unbreachable locked door is to be blasted apart, literally, in a hail of bullets.

As well as revisiting old locations with a new perspective, *Chronicles* promises to shed light on the remaining mysteries and provide a full picture of the rise and demise of the Umbrella Corporation, eventually leading you into the unexplored depths of the Umbrella stronghold. However, it's unlikely we'll find out a great deal more about the nature of the game's revelations until the full trailer is released, due to be packaged with the game previewed below.



Resident Evil 4: Wii Edition

Can Capcom convince that there's more to this release than an opportunity to get a sneak peak at Umbrella Chronicles?

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MAY 31**





The additional content in which you play as Ada Wong, still impractically dressed for running about in the mud, gives you the opportunity to experiment with a couple of interesting new weapons, and explores in greater depth plot points alluded to in the main story-arc, including her links to Wesker

With a tailor-made *Resident Evil* Wii experience already in the works (above) a cynic might view a specific Wii adaptation of *RE4* as a rather tired cash-in. Indeed, that same cynic might wonder how a Wii edition could be any less necessary, given that the GameCube version is compatible with the newer console (so long as you have the original GameCube controller, of course).

But what that cynic would discover very quickly is that trying to find a copy of now-rare original is an epic adventure in itself. And for those who did miss it first time round, the game's exceptional quality shines as brightly now as it did on release. Nor is this a simple port: like the PS2 version, it includes the additional side-missions in which you get to play as secret agent Ada Wong, and the controls have of course been suitably re-envisioned for the Wii, making use of the Remote's motion sensitivity for the action sequences.

Indeed, what the game's arrival on Wii mostly demonstrates is how badly that system is still lacking truly meaty gaming



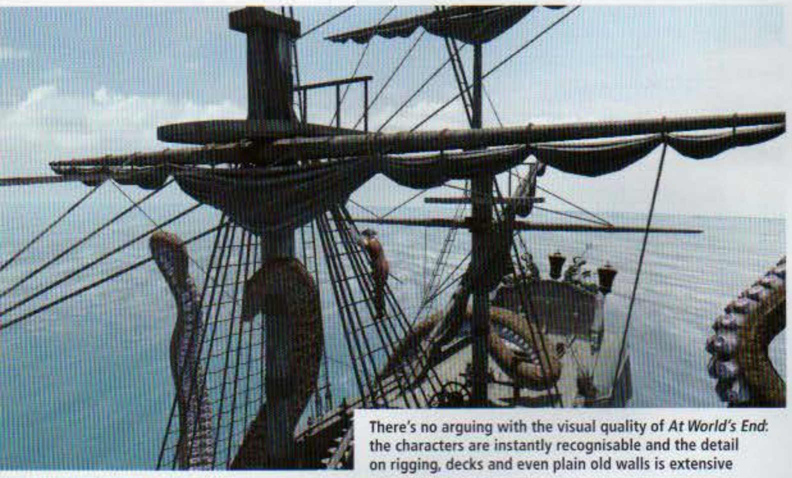
Aiming, at least, should be more intuitive on the Wii than it was on the GameCube, and on lower difficulty settings it's made even easier by a laser sight that can pin-point rampaging parasite-infested villagers at a great distance

experiences. It may not be representative of the core philosophy behind the console, but *RE4*'s arrival on Wii is likely to show up current contenders – the *Red Steels* and the *Rival Swords*, indeed almost everything other than *Twilight Princess* – as lacking in ambition, scale and simple excellence. Indeed, if nothing else, it's a perfect expression of just how radical the Wii is: can you think of another successful console whose best looking game was 2 years old and developed for the previous hardware generation?

FORMAT: **360, PS2, PS3, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **EUROCOM**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MAY**

Pirates Of The Caribbean: At World's End

"So, can you sail under the command of a pirate, or can you not?"



There's no arguing with the visual quality of *At World's End*: the characters are instantly recognisable and the detail on rigging, decks and even plain old walls is extensive









You'll spend a lot of your time swordfighting and despite the basics being a bit, well, basic, there are a variety of dodges, charges and special attacks to liven it all up

Disney Interactive Studios is a new return to an old name for Buena Vista Games, the interactive publishing arm of the Disney corporation, but that won't change its responsibility for a plethora of licensed titles. It would be far too easy to dismiss this as an entirely bad thing when the market clearly demands cross-media titles, and the corresponding developer investment is taking many of these licences light years away from their old 2D side-scrolling standards. Also, DIS investment is now spreading outside of purely Disney IP and across the games industry with the likes of *Lumines* and *Turok*, as well as spinoffs such as *Kingdom Hearts* and *Meteos: Disney Edition*. Whether you love 'em or hate 'em, Disney's characters and money are going to be in the industry for a very long time.

Lots of people obviously love Pirates Of The Caribbean to make it a multi-billion dollar franchise: unfortunately, the various game tie-ins have ranged from awful to average. *At World's End* aims to redress this balance and provide a suitable counterpoint to the jolly pyrotechnics of the upcoming film, claiming to present characters and locations in more detail, extend the storyline and offer an exclusive counterpoint to the cinematic ending.

It certainly has its best foot forward: all of the character models are exquisitely detailed, from Sparrow's eyes and hair to the drunks that loll in town corners, and the animation is excellent, be you fighting, jumping or simply wandering around town. Whether you'll get tired of seeing Captain Jack perform the same animations again and again on the hundreds of identical foes that head his way is another question, and a genre problem that *At World's End* doesn't feel the need to confront.

Effective rather than innovative is the watchword here. Developer Eurocom has a history of decent enough conversions and licences, but the likes of *Buffy: Chaos Bleeds* and *Batman Begins* don't inspire hopes of a radical new way of doing things. That in no way means that *AWE* will be anything other than an entertaining adventure, with several of the better elements from those games combined with an emphasis on the franchise characters for an at-times genuinely funny experience: the Jack Sparrow killing blow delivered to one boss was the old 'look over there' trick before a nudge off a bridge.

DIS claims an 'adaptive swashbuckling' system requiring creativity, but in practice this equates to a perfectly serviceable combat system with counter-attacks, context-sensitive buttons and special attacks. A Duel mode demands more sophistication than button-bashing, but this is saved for the well-scripted boss encounters, while levels are often set up by wandering around a town finding characters with information or performing various tasks. It's all relatively standard, but pleasingly implemented and never onerous.

The one thing it does excel in is capturing the spirit of the films, and thanks to the graphical grunt of 360 and PS3 you could almost be forgiven for thinking that Johnny Depp and co have been cloned, shrunk and pressed into DIS service. Whether the claim that this will 'satisfy the pirate in each of us' rings true remains to be seen, and fans of the series looking for a less linear ride may want to plump for the imminent *Pirates Of The Caribbean: Online*, but those after a diverting swashbuckler with excellent production values could do much worse. Just like the films, really.



It's an all-too-common event for a pirate to go for an honest drink and be accosted by uniformed thugs. Luckily you've got your sword, but you never do get your grog



Shiver me timbers

Captain Jack Sparrow is a distinctive type, and a great deal of care has been taken over recreating his character and actions. As well as his various fighting moves, he puts Lara to shame in clambering around and putting his sword to good effect where simple athletics aren't enough. The other playable characters, Will Turner and Elizabeth Swann, are similarly well realised, and you can expect to shimmy, climb and wall-jump your way through sections of most levels, with the new industry standard of button prompts for special actions. Each system also has some minor distinctions in controls: on PS3, the Sixaxis will help in balancing your way across some convenient narrow beams, while on Wii the Remote is incorporated much as you'd expect for your sword strokes.

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI UNIVERSAL**
DEVELOPER: **SABER INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **US/RUSSIA**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E171**

TimeShift

After a few false starts, Saber Interactive has tried to turn back the clock on its game's troubled development



Jeffrey Archer lookalike Dr Krone has gone back in time and taken over the world. Only you can stop his evil plans





Whether or not you appreciated its brash aesthetics, *TimeShift* used to be unashamedly colourful. However, in an attempt to project a more austere façade, this latest incarnation seems to have taken pointers from *Gears Of War*'s washed-out 'destroyed beauty'

Originally expected some time last year, *TimeShift*'s release date has itself experienced a bit of time travel in order for the game to undergo an abrupt overhaul. Out has gone the steampunk aesthetics of earlier trailers, replaced by a grim, war-torn dystopia with inclement weather and a muted palette. The knotted tangle of the time-bending plot has been pruned, and the protagonist ditched in favour of an avatar that's more an extension of the player than a character in its own right.

This isn't all that's changed: the game's graphics have been boosted in an attempt to make them worthy of current consoles. Bump-mapped detail textures, more accurate material physics and an improved renderer bring a level of graphical fidelity that was absent from its previous incarnation.

However, the title's central gimmick has been deemed worthy of remaining largely untouched. Thanks to the malfunctioning time-travel abilities of your suit, you can momentarily pause, slow or reverse the world around you while you remain unaffected. The intention is to bring a new dimension to firefights and puzzles that would otherwise present insurmountable odds. Chokepoints are no longer lethal gauntlets: you can slow time, peg it through before anyone can get a bead on you, and start plugging your would-be assassins from behind. A destroyed bridge can be un-destroyed as you run across it. Or you can stop time altogether and examine individual raindrops hanging in mid-air.

These abilities only operate for a short span of time, and, interestingly, all three are controlled by a single button, as the game intuits the most useful function via context. We can only hope that it intuits correctly. Because although, in terms of the effect on gameplay, there seems to be only a superficial difference between the slow and stop abilities, it's conceivable that an inadvertent rewind might frustrate your plans.

Hopefully, *TimeShift* will use this central conceit to great effect, integrating your abilities with each of the game's challenges. Although, given its stuttering development so far, *TimeShift* could still find itself undone if its major device isn't thoughtfully implemented.

Heist

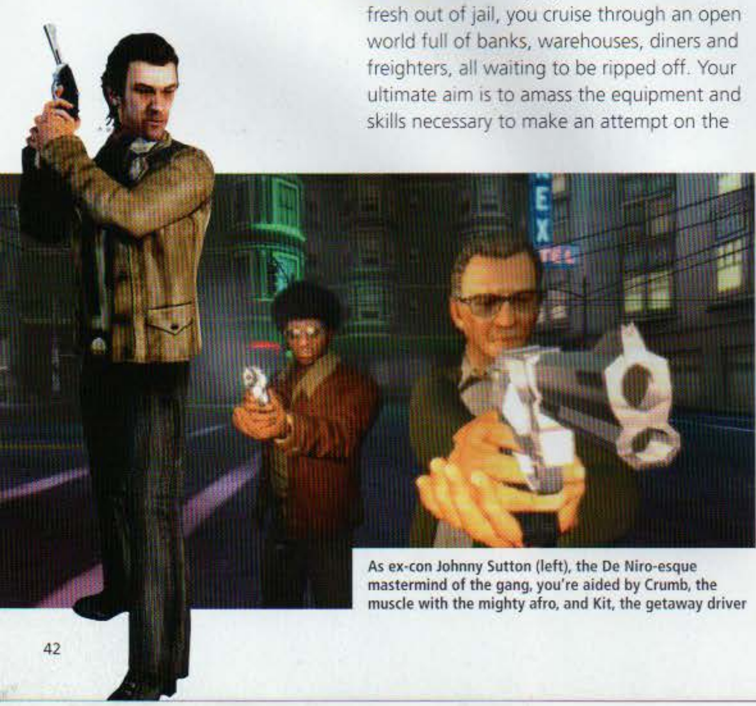
Rebellion, great tunes and the odd robbery: InXile Entertainment lets us loose in a San Francisco sandbox

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3,**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **INXILE ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q4 2007**

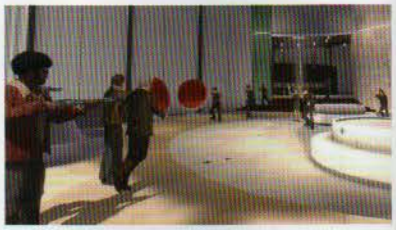
Heist is about three things: bank robberies, classic cars and '60s music. Playing as Johnny Sutton, fresh out of jail, you cruise through an open world full of banks, warehouses, diners and freighters, all waiting to be ripped off. Your ultimate aim is to amass the equipment and skills necessary to make an attempt on the San Francisco mint. The robbery mechanic looks to have a pleasing level of depth: you can case out a target, get hints and side missions that help your eventual robbery from your Uncle Sal, and plan out your crew's movements before the heist using blueprints.

Your crew is a bunch of stereotypical but fun crooks, from a slightly psychotic tough guy to a safecracker with too much of an eye for attractive bank clerks. These personalities have to be managed alongside your plan to ensure everything runs smoothly (greatly helped by headset-based voice control letting you order your crew on the fly). This involves such things as prepping your getaway driver, looking for hostages that might trip an alarm, and dealing with any security that gets too brave. If everything goes wrong and the police arrive too soon, you're in trouble: they're far more capable than the occasionally Keystone cops of *GTA*, and if the building is surrounded you have problems.

But if everything goes right then you head for your hideout with the loot in your customisable getaway car. These sections are classic Starsky and Hutch, with plenty of powerslides, drifts, jumps and cardboard boxes for negotiation, while distractions can be pre-arranged to help you lose the police, from helping out garbage workers to organising a hippy protest between the bank and the police station. Such touches lend *Heist* the charm of a good crime caper, and the varying ways you can stage a robbery may be enough to make the relatively few central mechanics last the length without becoming repetitive.



As ex-con Johnny Sutton (left), the De Niro-esque mastermind of the gang, you're aided by Crumb, the muscle with the mighty afro, and Kit, the getaway driver





You can reward or punish your motley crew of criminal henchmen depending on their actions: for showing restraint with an annoying hostage, Crumb receives a high five

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM NINJA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**



Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword

Tecmo's flagship studio throws its considerable weight at the DS to lure hardcore gamers to a platform associated with casual play

Of the six titles announced at Tecmo's spring press conference, half were for the DS. It's a trend reflected across the Japanese game industry, as developers and publishers wake up to the huge install-base and diverse demographic that the handheld represents. The decision to bring *Ninja Gaiden* to the DS, a franchise that has been assiduous in pursuing the bleeding edge of technology, is a sign that the market for the console runs the gamut from the esoteric and hardcore to the highly accessible casual games of the so-called Touch Generation.



Successfully tracing particular kanji characters will activate a Fury mode, causing the hero to fly into a berserker rage and automatically attack opponents – you only need to point him in the right direction

As head designer Tomonobu Itagaki mentioned in his keynote speech, Team Ninja had the opportunity to pick from several franchises, including *Dead Or Alive*, but chose *Ninja Gaiden* specifically for its excessively masculine hardcore connotations. The intention is not to create a broader, simplified version for the lower tech device, but to push its unique features to their limits. Indeed, the quality of the graphics and sound suggest that Team Ninja is just as capable of squeezing the best from the handheld as it is developing for higher spec consoles.

The controls, too, are well considered. Holding the DS like a book, the left screen acts as a map, while the touchscreen on the right displays the game environment. Not a single button is used – all movement and combat is directed with the stylus. One touch on the screen will make the hero run towards the spot, and rapid taps will make him jump. Similarly, once engaged in combat, a single tap on an enemy launches a shuriken and swipes of the pen simulate different attacks with the katana, building into balletic combos and executing special attacks when certain kanji characters are reproduced.



The environments, seamlessly blending 2D and 3D, really are something fairly remarkable for a handheld, proving that Team Ninja can wring substantial graphical grunt and finesse out of any console, no matter how small

Bringing *Ninja Gaiden* to the DS is a bold statement, one that proclaims the potential of the console to excel in a wide range of genres. But it also suggests that handheld gaming has moved so far beyond a niche hobby in Japan that publishers now have to make efforts to recapture their original core audience of young male gamers.

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **APRIL 26**

Wii De Yawaraka Atama Juku

Nintendo makes the smart move and brings Big Brain Academy to the Wii

As one of the earliest and most immediately successful releases for the DS, *Big Brain Academy*, to give it its US name, might be considered one of the titles most responsible for the handheld's popularisation amongst casual gamers. And it's no surprise that Nintendo was quick to announce *Big Brain Academy*'s transfer to the Wii in the early hours of the console's launch.

Similar in concept to the original, this game invites you to prove your mental prowess in a series of deceptively simple minigames, testing you in five key areas: memory, reason, logic, computation and visual recognition. Although the rules of each minigame are immediately apparent and only the one button is required to complete them, it would be a mistake to think that completing the high level puzzles is no significant challenge.

Thankfully, before you receive an indelible and humiliating score, you're free to practise any of the mini-games as much as you like. Then, when you feel suitably prepared, you can subject yourself to the Test Mode, consisting of a randomly selected game from each of the five disciplines.

The result of your labours is a calculated Brain Weight, indicating your various areas of strength and weakness. Your performance is tracked as you progress through the game, so the minigames always remain at the appropriate difficulty.



The five major disciplines are each bolstered by four different minigames, making 20 games in total – five more than the DS version

The DS version allowed you to connect with up to seven others via Download Play and, wisely, the Wii version capitalises on the multiplayer feature, tying your accredited mental mass to your Mii.

But aside from the obvious satisfaction of showing off your swollen cerebrum across the online Wii community, the exact value of getting this version over that of the DS will be determined by how well it performs as a party game.



Curiously, multiplayer doesn't make full use of the Wii, limiting the number of Remotes to two at a time, with the majority of games using just a single Remote

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

Kyotaro Nishimura Suspense

Hot on the trail of Hotel Dusk, Tecmo takes a stab at the murder-mystery genre

With *Trace Memory*'s critical accolades and *Hotel Dusk*'s phenomenal domestic sales figures, shifting 200,000 copies within its first few weeks of release, it was probably only a matter of time before other publishing heavyweights started fishing around for more titles of that ilk. Not wanting to do its genre debut by halves, Tecmo has enlisted eminent mystery writer Kyotaro Nishimura to supply both the setting and his own likeness for the game – testament to the rapid rise of the mystery game genre from being a niche market to a highly commercial one.

The main story mode weaves together three separate investigations, each offering different methods of deduction, but ultimately congealing into a single overarching plot. The DS' upper screen shows the location, whilst the lower screen shows key items of interest, which can be examined separately.

Whether *Suspense*'s plot actually originates from Nishimura himself or whether this is simply an exercise in canny branding remains to be seen. Either way, Nishimura's authorial presence is determined to make itself known: in what might be considered a somewhat unorthodox feature for a game of this genre, Nishimura himself appears as a manga caricature in order to dispense hints and help to the player. It sounds disconcertingly egotistical, frankly, and unlike *Brain Training*'s jauntily disembodied Professor Kawashima, Nishimura is presiding over fictional events in which you, as the player, must have some investment; it could easily trivialise your sense of the story were its creator constantly appearing to remind you that he wrote it.

However, it may be that Tecmo is trying to strike a different tone with this game – more *Brain Training* than *Hotel Dusk* – and needs the figure of Nishimura as a means of unifying the main story mode with its standalone mini-mystery puzzle mode, which promises a more casual approach. In fact, it may be this slightly jarring mixture of form and content that sets the game apart from other imitators – and you can rest assured that there will now be many to follow.





Selecting the newspaper will zoom in to the print, allowing you to underline portions of text with the stylus. In the same way, you can draw the supposed route taken by a suspect on a map, or highlight any inconsistencies between two testimonies

Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan 2

Nintendo drums up some enthusiasm for its handheld rhythm game sequel

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**

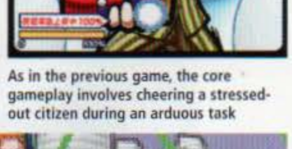


The gameplay is made entertaining by the enormous seriousness with which the Ouendan, and the new blue-clad cheer team, approach their cheering duties, contrasting with the banality of the tasks being cheered

Although meeting with cult adoration at its Japanese release, the original *Ouendan* was dwarfed by its westernised remake, *Elite Beat Agents*. The latter, essentially a complete refit of the game, swapped out all the culturally specific references and replaced the trio of sombre black-clad male cheerleaders with sharp-suited and generally groovy secret agents.

Ouendan 2, briefly introduced at this year's GDC, is the sequel to the Japanese game, so the heroic squad is back to dance people out of distress. The original trio are to be joined by a second squad, clad in blue but no less bathetically solemn than the first. Likewise, some of the characters who you cheered to victory in the first game will return in need of further moral support.

You can also expect the return of multiple difficulty modes, including a tutorial, and multiplayer support. Up to four players can join each other in either in versus or cooperative modes, available via download play. Fifteen characters are available to choose from in versus mode, but with the same number of stages available as its predecessor, it seems like the sequel isn't attempting to offer considerably more value. Indeed, though there are new scenarios and story-lines to pursue, *Ouendan 2* is not expected to bring any changes to the basic format. It will ensure sales over the original simply by being crammed full of the latest Japanese chart hits – which may or may not fill you with excitement.



As in the previous game, the core gameplay involves cheering a stressed-out citizen during an arduous task



DEPTH CHARGED

No longer just flat and blue, water is about to get its starring role

Most game water is little more than a glassy hindrance to movement. Though an early demo of *Metal Gear Solid 2* featured Snake thrillingly being chased down a corridor by a flood of it, the sequence was dropped from the final game and we've seen little since.

But Blade Interactive's new toy, a fluid dynamics engine that accurately models water and its physical effects on objects, is set to change all that. Seeing it in action in a demo of *Hydrophobia*, its first game outing, is immediately startling.

Set in the metal bowels of a ship, the demo starts out with a body of water shut into a room at the top of an inclined corridor. The player character opens the sliding doors and it pours out, sweeping the character with it as it cascades down the slope and into an enclosed space at the bottom. As the flow continues the space inexorably fills, and various crates and debris begin to chaotically bob around, along with the character. The level inches up toward the ceiling, the water slopping heavily against the walls and leaving damp, dripping tidemarks, until it finally stops leaving just enough room to breathe.

Spilling and rushing with subtle violence in this claustrophobic environment, *Hydrophobia*'s water is alive with movement, effortlessly flowing around obstacles, forming eddies and turbulence and foamy areas of calm. In more open spaces it rolls, queasily slapping from wall to wall.

The engine's creator, **Huw Lloyd**, has wanted to implement proper fluid dynamics in a game since studying flows of gas in space for his PhD in astrophysics. "Water hasn't been done very well in games, it's just a flat plane," he says, explaining that this is no cut-down simulation. "This is proper fluid dynamics, with all the emergent behaviour in eddies and turbulence."

A narrative-led game styled by Blade's MD, **Peter Jones**, as a 'survival adventure', *Hydrophobia* is set on an enormous luxury city ship with twin hulls and ten deck levels. When terrorists, the New Malthusians (see 'Backwater story') take it over, it begins to sink with the player character, an engineer called Kate, trapped behind enemy lines. A reluctant hero in the manner of Die Hard's John McClane, Kate is forced to use ingenuity, rather than just weaponry, to counter the terrorists' aims.

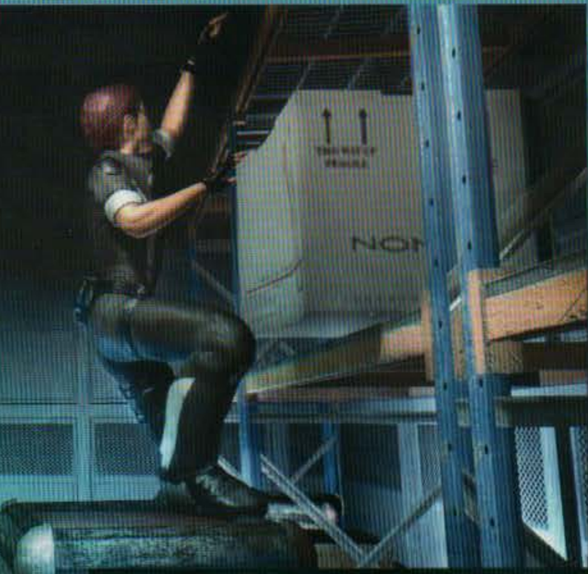
The closed nature of the ship allows the water to effect great and unpredictable changes on the game environment – making lights short out, areas impassable, items and furniture float or move and walls become ceilings. The hope is to have the water act as a central dynamic for the game, supplying a consistent set of rules to direct play and influence decisions. For instance, Kate's backpack will weigh her down if too full and drown her, and make the slow, unstoppable flooding of areas races against time.

"We're building a game around the tech," says Jones. "It's a liberating experience because it means that the tech guys can always actually do what we ask them." The system works by calculating a flow field – the speed and direction of flow at any point in space. This flow field affects all objects and characters in that space, as well as graphical representations of



TITLE: **HYDROPHOBIA**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **BLADE INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **LATE 2008**





Hydrophobia's grip and climb system will allow Kate to improvise her progression through the ship's interiors by clinging onto anything that sweeps by her and using it to access previously out of reach areas

bubbles and foam, so it truly becomes part of the game environment.

So bullets will cut Saving Private Ryan-style trails of bubbles into the water and leave clouds of blood that the system will naturally diffuse, and the acoustics of rooms will alter as water levels change. With the knowledge that the water is the star of *Hydrophobia*, care is being given to making sure the water will look as good as it behaves, with it reflecting and refracting accurately, being murky or clear, creating caustics – light reflections on walls and ceilings – and leaving damp evidence of its passing.

Jones is unashamed to acknowledge the close inspiration of popular sci-fi and action films like Die Hard, Aliens, Blade Runner, Saving Private Ryan and The Abyss on *Hydrophobia*. The player character is heavily conflicted, with a childhood incident having rendered her, rather inconveniently, scared of water. The hope is, though, that such schlock is more about providing gameplay than an excuse for Hollywood-style narrative arcs. Her fear will affect her oxygen use, so part of the challenge will be to keep her calm.

Blade's intention is to allow a fair degree of



The game already exhibits a huge array of visual effects, including reflections, shadows and volumetric fogging. Current framerates are reasonable, even with water splashing around at the same time







As the name might suggest, Blade's intention is to have the unstoppable creeping and rushing of water as a fundamental source of the horror in *Hydrophobia* – Kate's fear of water helps

choice during play, with open environments and an elastic structure that bottlenecks at key narrative points. For instance, the opening section will feature several routes through it. Kate will be washed past the opening to one shorter but more dangerous route, but can take it if you succeed in getting her to reach out for handholds and claw her way into it using a grip system similar to the one being used in the forthcoming *Assassin's Creed*. It's clear that the water will frequently be used to direct, if not always dictate, her progress.

As well as the unpredictable environment, Kate will also have to deal with the terrorists using her engineer's knowledge of the ship, as well as a bit of stealth and puzzle solving. Since the focus here is away from direct gun combat, she'll be able to set traps such as flooding rooms to drown them and use the ship's systems to know where they are. The AI, therefore, is being tuned to being reactive rather than scripted to reflect this open nature.

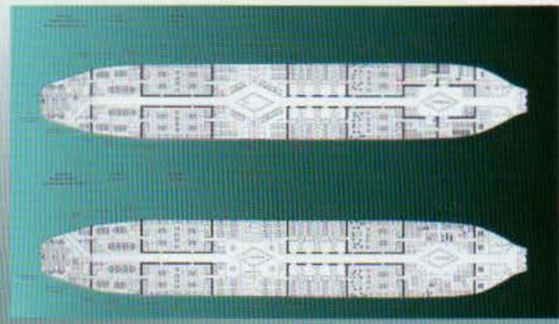
Though the current demo and released screenshots feature the game's opening in the rather uninspiring and dingy bottom of the ship, its sheer size will afford a great variety of







The day we visited, there was great excitement at Blade because its YouTube video introducing HydroEngine (by smashing a fish tank filled with water) had already attracted 6,000 hits on the day it had been uploaded. Many viewers left comments asking that the finished game include rubber duckies. We can only hope they listen



BACKWATER STORY

Blade is trying to stick close to reality to make *Hydrophobia*'s setting and story believable. The ship is loosely inspired by the Freedom Ship, a concept for a floating city, and the ideology of the terrorist group is based on the theories of political economist Thomas Malthus, who proposed in 1798 that population would increase faster than its ability to feed itself. The New Malthusians oppose anything that is trying to artificially extend the population, so they strike the ship in order to destroy a company that has invented a way of purifying water through nanotechnology. "We want the terrorists to be believable, not just bozos to shoot," says Jones.

environments, from parks to malls, seamy crew quarters to casinos. The ten decks and two hulls represent an enormous amount of work for a small company – currently around 40 employees – to realise, especially one that until now has been almost completely focused creating snooker and pool games.

Such huge ambition is possible, says Jones, through Blade's new development toolset, called Infinite Worlds. Comprising a level editor and asset management, it allows level designers to quickly put together environments on their PCs and see each change reflected immediately in the game running on a development 360. "We're building this ship because we can. Something huge," he says. "People outside will think that we must have had an army, but no."

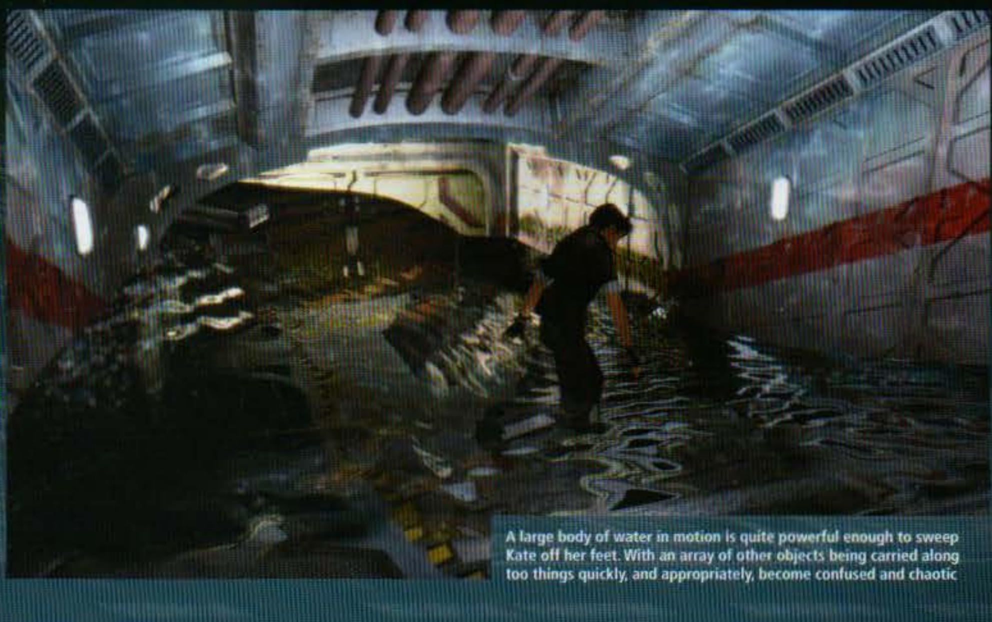
The intention is that level designers will immediately see if their levels work – how the water behaves and how they play and look – and an outsourced company will create most art assets (game objects, architectural forms and textures) and remotely enter them into the Infinite Worlds system for immediate use. This is Blade's solution to the challenge of producing games for the 360 and PS3 generation.

We wonder if there's a chance that environments will end up looking generic, but Jones emphatically believes not: "No. We just need bloody good concept artists. We can produce the levels as if in a factory and make them distinct with material qualities like sound effects and layers of dirt mapping."

The production process is certainly pragmatic, and Blade certainly has time – *Hydrophobia* is due for completion in around 18 months. But until then, it has to make sure that it doesn't get distracted by all the other game elements it has yet to put together – the stealth play and puzzle solving, the narrative and combat. After all, the central star of *Hydrophobia* should certainly be the water, in all its dramatically dynamic glory.

If *Hydrophobia* can allow its water the same kind of freedom throughout the game as it has gushing through that demo, then it could well invent a whole new gaming plaything, not to mention a new watery survival mini-genre of its own.

BULLETS WILL CUT TRAILS INTO THE WATER AND LEAVE CLOUDS OF BLOOD THAT WILL NATURALLY DIFFUSE



A large body of water in motion is quite powerful enough to sweep Kate off her feet. With an array of other objects being carried along too things quickly, and appropriately, become confused and chaotic







TITLE: **SPLINTER CELL: CONVICTION**
FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **CHRISTMAS**



BOURNE AGAIN

A new beginning for the spy series turns night into day and leaves Sam on the lam

The curse of the perennially successful franchise is a struggle for innovation. As the adage goes, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. If one were to look for an illustration of this point, Ubisoft's profitable Tom Clancy brand would immediately suggest itself as a good candidate. It seems like each of its series churn out an instalment at a rate of one or more per year, and, although often of a high quality, there is little to differentiate a game from its predecessors beyond a gentle migration towards more streamlined and sophisticated play.

Splinter Cell: Conviction, however, may be the game to upset this trend. It brazenly dispenses with many of the series' most identifiable tropes in pursuit of notions of gameplay that are radically different in their construction. The main sources of inspiration have clearly shifted, moving from Mission: Impossible and James Bond to less fantastic, grimly urban material like the Jason Bourne films and Die Hard. Gone is the sneaking amongst the shadows; gone are the cat-like acrobatics; gone are the goggles.

"*Splinter Cell*'s always been identified by the three dots of the goggles," says **Patrick Fortier**, the project's creative director. "They're just this huge icon and we had to take them out. The first time we did that it was like, well, where's Sam Fisher? So we had to really find him."

And where did they find him? "We wanted to get out of the typical military bases and abandoned warehouses and things like that," says Fortier. No longer is Sam infiltrating the missile silos, skyscrapers and secret laboratories of previous games, breaking terrorists' necks at the behest of the US government – but fleeing from the authorities through the mundane, urban landscape of Washington, populated by crowds of civilians into which he must blend if he is to remain undetected.

They also seem to have found more of Sam than was there before – and that's not just in reference to his new beard. *Conviction* is intent on evolving Sam from wise-cracking veteran to a character who is more than just a cypher for the player, one who can carry and justify the game's mechanics, rather than being defined by them.

The *Conviction* team credits *Splinter Cell: Double Agent* as being the first step in the franchise's renewal – its attempt to up the emotional investment in Sam leaves *Conviction* open to create a game more closely centred on him, rather than around the mechanics of play. It has to be said, however, that the team isn't especially convincing about *Double Agent*'s role in this process of renovation, particularly since the Montreal-based team conceived its ambitions for *Conviction* back in 2005 after finishing work on *Chaos Theory*.

If players remember little of *Double Agent*'s garbled story, or its cursory glance towards Sam's emotional motivations, then *Conviction*'s developers seem to recall even less. "Did Anna Grimsdottir even appear in *DA*?" Fortier asks at one point. But this kind of confusion is perhaps understandable given the title's fractious development, with the 360 and PS3 version handled by Ubisoft Shanghai, and teams in Montreal responsible for the very different game of the same name that graced other consoles.

"This time around," says producer **Dany Lepage**, "The 360 version, the PC version, the solo and the multiplayer mode – it's all done by the same team. It's going to bring us a lot of coherence. If you played the previous version you'd see it was basically two different games."

These aren't the only criticisms that the team has of the previous games – criticisms which *Conviction* addresses, they are keen to establish. Fortier talks of how the series has found it difficult to evolve beyond the premise of the first game. "*Chaos Theory* was the perfection of *Splinter Cell*: taking all the elements of the first game and making them really polished – the purest expression of the original idea. What we wanted to do with



HARD CELL

Although Ubisoft refused to discuss the multiplayer, after being plied with wine and bombarded with an endless torrent of questions, a bewildered Lepage was able to confirm that *Conviction* would have the civilian crowd in multiplayer, and that, in contrast to the disappointments of the 360 version of *Double Agent*, some kind of co-op would return. Although he wouldn't say exactly what this would entail, he did say what it wasn't: it isn't going to follow the duo of agents who appear in previous games, but neither will it be the same as the singleplayer campaign.

Conviction was to go back and introduce players to a whole new concept."

Whereas *Splinter Cell*'s central stealth motif was facilitated by the ability to manipulate light and shadow, *Conviction*'s watchword is improvisation, and its progenitor is the game's dynamic environment. Lepage explains: "Pretty much everything in the game will be dynamic. If you've played a *Splinter Cell* game before, you'll notice that it's always been very static. You'd hide in the dark and wait for the right moment to do something. But in this game you are going to have to act all the time. The fugitive concept is helping us to bring that dynamic kind of gameplay."

"There's this idea of the action coming to you," says Fortier. "You can't just hide somewhere forever and disappear. People will eventually find you. You're a wanted man."

Exactly how Sam becomes a fugitive following the events of *Double Agent* is somewhat muddled – an inevitability given that *DA*'s two versions had different resolutions, and multiple possible endings within each. The canonical sequence of events appears to ignore Sam's avowal to wreak vengeance upon his employers for the assassination of Enrica Villablanca – something which appeared in *DA*'s last-generation console versions. Instead, *Conviction* opens with Sam 'taking a break' from Third Echelon, only to return in order to help his old friend, Anna Grimsdottir. The agency he finds is one beleaguered and bloated with bureaucracy and incompetence.

"The left hand doesn't talk to the right hand," Fortier says. "You're given objectives but not the right equipment, or you're not given the right timing. A lot of situations you're going to be faced with have to be resolved through non-traditional means, so we're introducing our new gameplay right from the start."

This section of the game lasts for about three hours – a fifth of the projected total playtime of the game. Hampered by a lack of co-operation from within Third Echelon, Sam realises that, in order to pursue an investigation further, he's going to have to go rogue. As such, with the combined forces of the Washington police and Third Echelon forever homing in on Sam's location, he is forced to equip himself, not with the gadgets of *Splinter Cell*s past, but with his very surroundings. "Before, you had that whole relationship with the light and shadow," Fortier explains: "What if you had that relationship with the environment? What if you could pick up the chair that you're sitting on right now and start blocking a door with it or hitting someone with it? You could push things around, protect yourself, take cover with it or hide with it."

The move away from hi-tech gear is also intended to add a level of accessibility: "The stuff you previously had in your inventory was a little bit abstract until you started using it," Fortier says. "You needed to invest a couple of hours in the concepts. Now, with the notion of everyday objects, there are things that people are a lot more familiar with, and they can more quickly imagine uses for them."

The reactivity of the environment extends beyond the props it contains. The very manner of the game world's construction enshrines dynamism. Lepage



describes each level as a "playground", a sandbox containing a number of interacting systems, the foremost amongst these being the crowds of civilians who provide human cover for Sam as he navigates his way through the urban settings. With up to 300

IN CONTRAST TO PREVIOUS GAMES, WHERE A LEVEL COULD BE NAVIGATED THROUGH AI ANALYSIS, CONVICTION HAS SO MANY VARIABLES IT NEVER PLAYS THE SAME WAY TWICE

characters wandering each level, every one with its own objectives, interacting with each other and reacting to Sam's behaviour, Lepage's description of the game as a simulation seems apt. Quite in contrast to previous *Splinter Cell* games, where a level could be navigated through the methodical analysis of repeating AI paths, in *Conviction* there are so many variables that it never plays the same way twice.

The environments, therefore, are necessarily less linear than previous games. For example, Sam will find himself at the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC (surely a knowing nod to Sam's own endeavours in that part of the world). He starts the level with two objectives – to plant a bomb beneath someone's car and to break in to a building and erase a security tape – all the while remaining undetected by the security services.

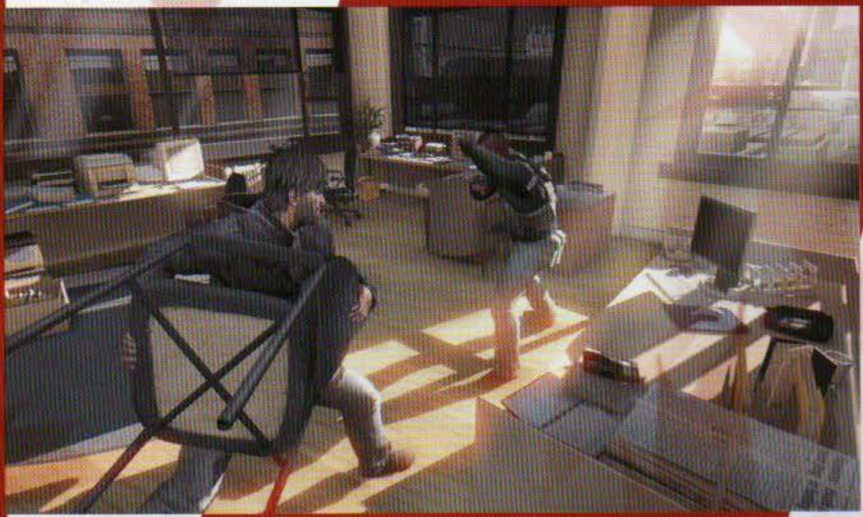
From this point in, however, the manner in which Sam attempts these tasks is not strictly defined. He has to negotiate his way through the crowds of civilians without attracting attention, something he can achieve by mimicking the behaviour of the crowd. "Whatever the civilians in the crowd do, you can do too," says Fortier. "So, if you see a civilian drinking from the water fountain, sitting on a bench, getting stuff from a vending machine, looking at posters, you can do those things and be inconspicuous."

A helpful visual clue, switching from thirdperson to firstperson, indicates that you are hidden amongst the masses. From this perspective it's easier to see if people around you are getting irked by your furtive lurking, as will happen if you follow a civilian for too long. Another useful feature (which suggests that the development team couldn't quite bring themselves to leave Sam without gadgets, even if they aren't gadgets in name) is Hero Vision, fading out the screen except for items of importance, such as pursuing policemen, who will be visible even when obscured by scenery.

The police won't know Sam on sight, but his cover will be blown if subjected to any scrutiny – the degree of suspicion he is under at any one point is indicated by a bar that goes red when a cop is



Dealing with the lower grade fuzz isn't too hard, but you need to be aware of who's watching. Civilian witnesses will point in the direction of your rapidly diminishing footsteps, and even try to revive downed cops





following him. When that happens it's essential that Sam break the line of sight with the cop, and slowly the bar depletes as his trail goes cold.

"If you're doing something wrong," says Lepage, "you're going to get snitched on by the civilians and then policemen are going to investigate. On the other hand, if you do it right, you can use that to your advantage."

Diversion and manipulation of the crowd are key to the game; if a situation gets particularly sticky, it's possible to fire off a few shots into the air, or into the gas cylinder of a hot dog stand, and blend in with the crowd as it scatters. However, the crowd aren't as simplistic or forgetful as in previous games, so such extreme tactics risk depleting the useful cover they offer.

Similarly, the police and security services scour the area for Sam in a methodical, rational way, moving from one item of interest to the next. "We want our NPCs to be aware of their surroundings," says **Olivier Petit**, an AI programmer. "They need to know where the hiding spots are, where the suspicious objects are." Anything Sam can use is at their disposal also. If Sam can vault over a wall, or hurl a chair across a room, or flip a table or drag a cabinet in order to gain cover, then they can as well.

Shooting your way out is rarely the optimum solution. "Sam Fisher's still a good guy," says Fortier. "He's not going to kill cops. But they won't hesitate to use weapons on him – so he's got a handicap there which he has to deal with."

Cause too much trouble and the police call in Third Echelon troops, who will be able to identify you on sight and are much better armed than the local constabulary. Although a trigger-happy approach won't always be rewarded, Lepage is keen to emphasise that there's a range of gameplay styles that are possible to pursue: "If you want to slow things down, you want to control things, then there are still possibilities to do that at certain times. But if you want to go a bit faster and try things out, you have a lot of means at your disposal to correct your mistakes and not get punished so much if you get found out."

There has been a thoughtful attempt to vary the pace of the game by breaking it down into 15-minute chunks. "It's a key element for the rhythm of the gameplay," Fortier says. "It's also a reflection of our play styles. We're growing older as gamers, and



Sam's new look is all part of the attempt to move away from super-solider to a more a human, emotively flawed protagonist



HARD TO HANDLE

Objects, even people, have a number of 'handles' which determine where Sam will attempt to hold them. Thanks to the fully-fledged physics system, a complex object like a chair, for example, could lie on the floor at any angle and yet it could only be feasibly held and carried in one position – so the handle system allows the best-fit animations to be generated procedurally (above). Lepage is particularly enthusiastic about the system's benefits: "Imagine the number of animations we would have had to make to interact with all those objects. If we'd used the *Chaos Theory* engine to build *Conviction* with the same team, I estimate that it would have taken 20 years."

it's sort of intimidating when you have that hour of play ahead of you and you don't have much time. So now you can have 15 minutes and still get something done."

"And then go change a diaper," interjects **Mathieu Ferland**, the game's senior producer.

"We wanted a lot more variety," continues Fortier. "We wanted situations where it's an all-out shooting gallery, and then another sequence where you have nothing and you're on the run, and another where you're infiltrating and stealthy."

So, at 15-minute intervals, the variables of the sandbox levels change. "There's this notion of a scripted situation, unscripted solution," says Lepage. "We take control away from the player and say: 'Well, this is what's happening: the building's getting surrounded'. Then we give the control back. How do you get out of it? What do you do about it?"

More often than not, the solution will involve body-slamming a few hapless members of the police into tables and then slipping unnoticed into the throng of the crowd. The fighting system is intuitive – its simplicity belied by the cinematic fluidity of the moves. As we've come to expect from the high production values of previous games, there appears to be real contact between Sam and his foe – but the combinations of moves, and the speed at which he switches between them, are unprecedented. It's the



Boxerman: "We look at all the attack handles on a character, we look at all the attack animations we have, iterate through them, find the best match and use that one. So there's always a solid contact"

substantial efforts have created naturalistic behaviour is the dynamic navigation mesh. With so many interactive physics-enabled objects on the level, it's easy for paths and walkways to become obstructed – the mesh allows civilians and police to find routes around objects on the fly.

"Hopefully players won't see all the mechanics behind it," says Fortier. "I don't think players are going to be amazed by the fact that characters don't walk into each other or don't walk into objects. They take that for granted. For us it was a big challenge. Players aren't going to care about that. But they will appreciate what comes out of it: these really freeform situations and how things adapt to their actions."

The team is similarly blasé about the high quality of *Conviction*'s graphics. Although the game has superbly modelled environments and props, and



"WE'RE USING THE POWER OF THE CONSOLE TO ACTUALLY CREATE A NEW EXPERIENCE. IT'S NOT JUST TO IMPROVE IMMERSION, IT'S TO CHANGE THE WAY YOU SEE THE GAME"

result of a smart animation system, which itself took eight months to develop. (See 'Hard to handle')

"It's looking more solid by the day," says **Eddy Boxerman**, a physics programmer on the game. "Sam really looks like he's actually attacking, like he really understands his environment, what the characters around him are doing." As he speaks, his colleague, Guillaume Plourde, has Sam kick the shins out from underneath a policeman. Then, in one swift move, Sam grabs the falling body and slings it back into a piece of shelving. Such an action is not complex to execute, however, as Boxerman then explains: "The game analyses what the current situation is and gives the player the best result possible. So if you hit a certain button you won't get a specific move; you'll get a cool move on a certain line. It makes the character look very powerful."

It's a design strategy that is in evidence across the game – a sense of cinema made accessible via simple controls, bolstered by complex underlying technology. Another example of how the team's

plenty of fancy jargonised lighting techniques, such as indirect lighting and ambient occlusion, Lepage mentions them as an afterthought: "We're going to have great graphics. But you've seen other games out there that have great graphics. We're using the power of the new console to actually create a new gameplay experience. It's not just to improve immersion, it's also to change the way you see the game itself, your environment."

Lepage may be overstating the case somewhat, but it's clear that *Conviction* is taking the series in a new direction and that it really does exploit the capabilities of the technology to create and populate environments that would not otherwise have been possible. Whether the game's many disparate and ambitious features all come together in time for Christmas is another matter, although Lepage is quick to point out that *Chaos Theory* was in a far less feature-complete state an equal number of months before shipping.

Fans of the series will either think it admirable or foolhardy that Ubisoft would be willing to gamble with the future of its flagship franchise – the title on which it cut its teeth as a development house.

"We're still staying true to the essence in terms of finding alternate solutions to a problem and having the means to hide," Fortier says in mitigation of potential fan-fears. "The fans themselves felt it was time for something different, fresher."

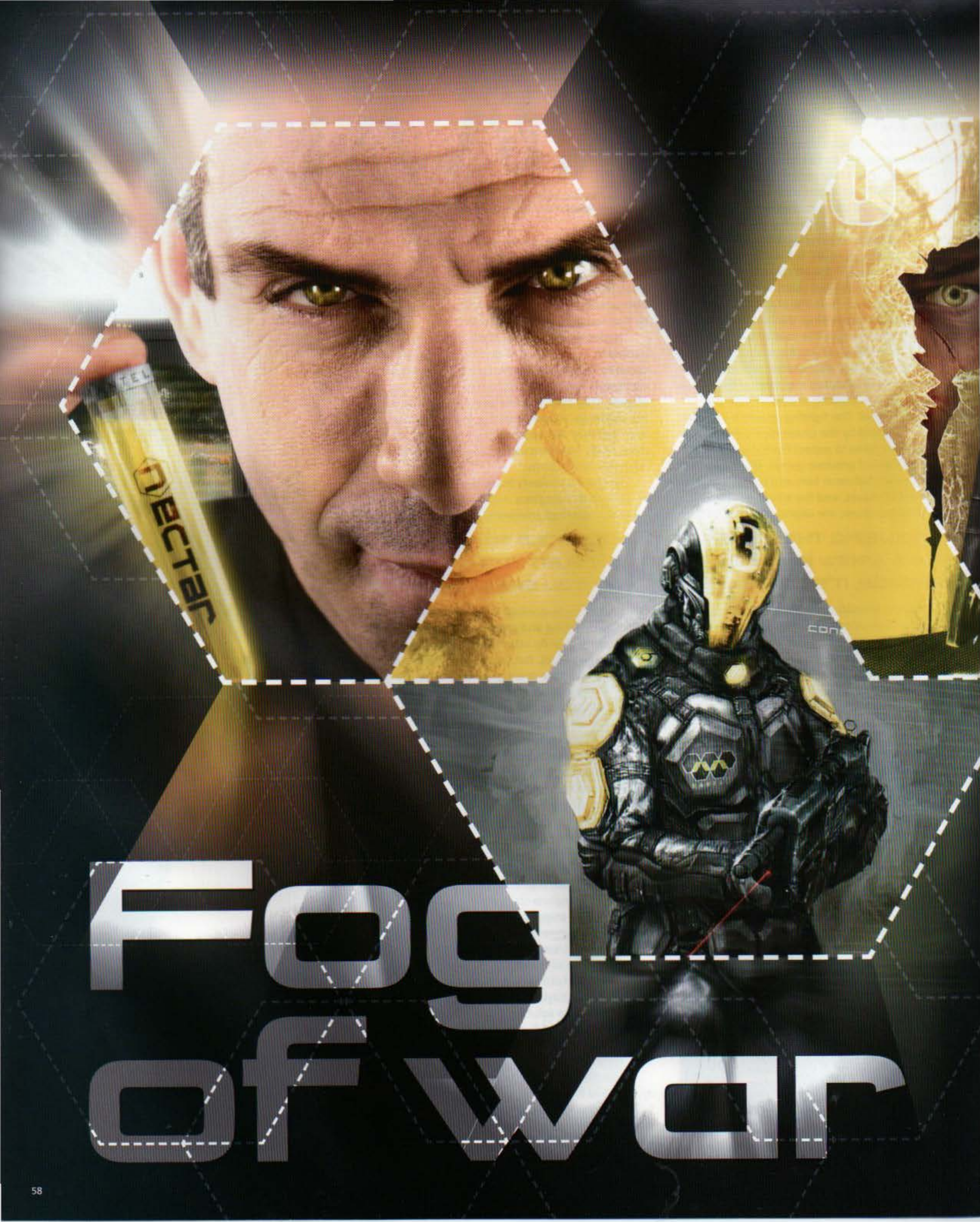
Regardless of its position as the fifth game in a much-loved franchise, it's clear that the game needs to succeed on its own terms first and foremost, and with a team displaying considerable vision, enthusiasm and, indeed, conviction, that doesn't seem to be mission: impossible.



Gunfights look to be hectic affairs in *Conviction*'s open and non-linear environments; it's easy to get flanked by your tactically astute enemies



L-R: Mathieu Ferland, senior producer, Dany Lepage, producer and Patrick Fortier, creative director, are the team behind both *Chaos Theory* and this latest instalment in the franchise



Fog of war





What begins with an H, has four letters, and might just revolutionise the FPS?

What does it mean, and how do we learn, to care about someone's fate? Family and friends might be the obvious place to start, but what about Forrest Gump, Hamlet or Buffy? What about the monochrome rows of Schindler's List? It's relatively common, even expected, for a movie or book to emotionally engage us, but arguably a foreign feature to gaming. This may not be the most obvious starting point for a look at *Haze*, Free Radical's showpiece all-format FPS: but *Haze* may just be a new starting point for the FPS and action games in general. Don't worry though – they've brought plenty of guns, drugs and mercenaries along for the ride as well.

TITLE: **HAZE**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **FREE RADICAL**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBC**



From left to right, David Doak, co-founder of Free Radical; members of the Free Radical team crack a smile at their Nottingham base; Derek Littlewood, project creative director; and screenwriter Rob Yescombe



Every piece of the soldiers' armour and equipment bears the Mantel insignia in some form, an uncompromising statement of ownership



Fresh from celebrating its eighth birthday in April, Free Radical can boast one of the industry's finest FPS pedigrees: founded by ex-Rare members who'd worked on *GoldenEye* and *Perfect Dark*, the developer has gone on to create the *Timesplitters* series as well as the critically acclaimed *Second Sight* (see Time Extend, **E**175). *Haze* made its debut at E3 2006 and was labelled, amongst other things, a 'jungle shooter' and compared to the likes of *Far Cry* – a full year on and it's painfully obvious how unfair those comparisons were in every respect, from the range of environments on offer to the game's innovative narrative line. The locations alone in this latest build range from the previously-seen jungles and atmospheric swamps to claustrophobic factories, rebel villages and mountain passes. But despite all this loveliness it's not a game that lends itself to the five-minute pitch, especially given the pretty big and complex claims being made for it. What was most unclear at E3 is exactly the thing that is most important about *Haze*: do Free Radical's promises of a new way of doing things stack up?

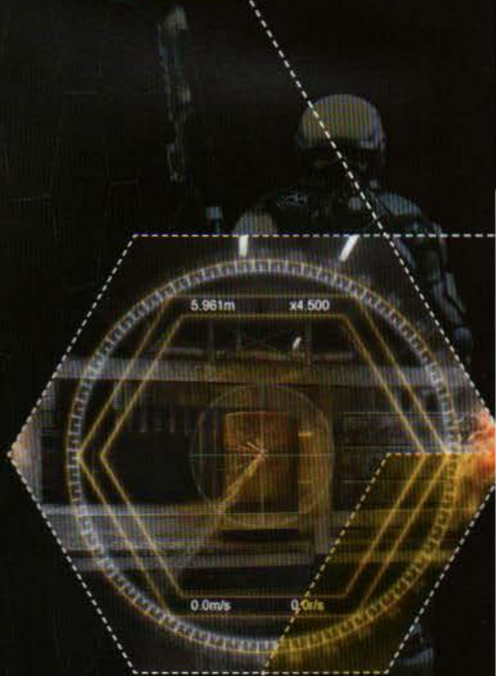
In the context of the current and future FPS glut, the bare bones of *Haze*'s story might not initially seem very remarkable. You play as Shane Carpenter, a new recruit to the private Mantel army: set in 2048, the UN and its like have collapsed, and military operations are outsourced to eerily prophetic private military corporations. In the future, the private sector does a fine Lord Kitchener impression, and a trailer shows an excerpt from a Mantel recruitment video with CEO David Bloomfield asking if you want to "make a difference", offering the chance to "be a hero" and "fight the good fight". As much of a character as Carpenter, Mantel is beautifully realised, a corporation with all the smooth taglines and euphemisms we might expect from a globe-spanning operation that dominates competitors and incorporates divisions from pharmaceutical to military. The brand infuses the design of all your weapons and combat gear (redesigned since last year and now significantly cleaner and crisper), and in a genre twist you'll begin with all of this extremely effective equipment while your enemies have to be more resourceful: after all, a bunch of angry villagers hardly have the production capacity and purchasing power of a multinational. The game begins with your first assignment: sent against a rebel faction, the Promise Hand, in South America before, Ubisoft promises: 'Things quickly begin to look a little strange'. Since E3, the squad command system has been dropped in favour of more independent AI teammates, a move that works well thanks to your comrades' intelligence, quick reactions and Nectar-induced rushes of blood. Dead teammates are quickly replaced by Mantel dropships, and there are tantalising glimpses (though no in-game use has yet been seen) of several corporation vehicles that will play some role in proceedings.

HAZE WAS LABELLED A 'JUNGLE SHOOTER' AND COMPARED TO THE LIKES OF FAR CRY – A FULL YEAR ON AND IT'S OBVIOUS HOW UNFAIR THOSE COMPARISONS WERE



The lush foliage seen at E3 remains, of course, but the game's latest build shows just how much more *Haze* has to offer in terms of environments

It's certainly a good looking game, and the world gives you some spectacular panoramic views of your surroundings before you jump in and begin raising hell. Lush ferns and creeping moss surround a mud path in one sequence, just before a spectacular Mantel airstrike is launched on a distant rebel settlement: as you reach the ruins minutes later fires rage, bodies lie still across the scene and pale flakes of ash float past your visor. It's one of those contradictory moments that games do so well: a near-perfect recreation of horrific devastation and yet a moment of awesome beauty. As you move through the game, time passes and the weather moves to reflect the mood of the moment: whether this could be described as pathetic fallacy is arguable but having, say, a sunrise at a climactic moment is a fairly common and effective cinematic device that's underused in gaming. But as **Derek Littlewood**, the









Your vision blurs slightly as you administer Nectar, before the pace of the game explodes. A sliding bar lets you judge your dosage, while remaining ampules are shown in the bottom-right. (Above right) Overdosing removes the distinction between friend and foe.

project creative director, is at pains to point out, "*Haze* isn't primarily about the technology – I'm immensely proud of the engine we have here, but it's not the first thing I talk about when I talk about *Haze*." And as for the frequent parallels drawn, "the comparisons to games like *Crysis* and *Far Cry* – well, *Haze* is completely different to either of those. We have a fantastic team of artists and our lead artist is one of the best in the world. And because of that, our engine is geared towards the artistic vision rather than a ticklist of features, and that's something we're very proud of." The incorporation of Nectar makes his point clear: the screen environment seems to dim as enemies become bright orange targets and a previously treacherous sequence becomes much more like a cakewalk, while the music quickens to a gung-ho action tune that synchs with your quickening movement, while sound effects become noticeably more dramatic. It's an experience that even at this early stage is pleasingly coherent and puts the processing and graphical power of the engine to focused use.

And it's just as well, because the Nectar mechanic is something you'll be seeing a lot of. In Mantel's corptalk, Nectar is a 'nutritional supplement' or 'performance-enhancing medication', but you'd be closer to the mark thinking of a 'mood-controlling battlejuice'. The Nectar is at the core of *Haze*, self-administered from a Mantel suit directly into the bloodstream, altering completely your perception of the battlefield. There are three key effects: foresight, perception and focus. Nectar foresight helps you identify, avoid and anticipate danger, largely through means of a spider-sense effect on the landscape: a grenade that lands at your feet, for example, will spread visible ripples of its future blast radius in the seconds before it explodes, warning you to move clear. Nectar perception is about identifying targets: this is the orange highlighting effect (very similar to a muted infrared scope, especially in the aura surrounding enemies) that makes it impossible for the rebel army to hide. And after avoiding danger and identifying targets, the FPS is all about going for the kill. Nectar focus helps you draw a bead and dispatch enemies, as well as turning your melee attacks into bonebreaking killers.

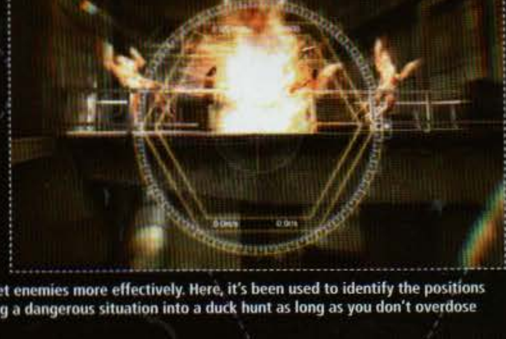
Mantel being Mantel, your Nectar continually regenerates and you'll rarely be without it, so the downsides are more subtle than simply running out. Littlewood is keen to emphasise that: "When you first start it's very much: 'Oh, this is great' and you pump yourself up – there are obvious flipsides to that, such as overdosing, but also a gameplay element whereby it encourages the player to play in a certain way, to be a bit maverick". The overdosing mechanic can come on through your own over-indulgence or external factors but, regardless, a change immediately occurs in your HUD: there's an alarm flash about 'bloodstream abnormality' and you can't distinguish Mantel from rebel. You might be able to sit that out, if you didn't also lose control of your firing and become basically a smart bomb in the middle of your own team. The rebels, of course, have figured this out and use various tactics to make the Mantel troopers overdose and turn against one another, something that comes into play in *Haze's*

Winners do use drugs

One particular moment in the sequences shown stands out: on the upper floor of an industrial plant everything is going to plan, a Mantel gunship hovers in front of you, solid slabs of sunlight point up the metal walkways as you walk forward, and there's a momentary lull. Suddenly the gunship is shot down, and at the same time you enter a nightmarish version of reality: the music jars, the screen darkens and the weather changes at an impossible rate to pounding rain. The enemies in front of you become noisier and, upon being shot, spurt blood and jerk around distressingly. And then, after perhaps a minute, a calming effect comes over the screen and your body chemistry is recalibrated. Everything returns to the way it was and, most interestingly, the previously writhing enemies – in that most revered of FPS shorthands – simply fade in front of you. It's an experience that, for all the visual quality and adrenalin, is primarily upsetting – and that's not an FPS emotion. As these flashes intrude into the game's narrative, it seems clear that a quality of Nectar is making war much more like a videogame for Mantel's soldiers. How far *Haze* will take the Jacob's Ladder scenario is unknown, but expect fireworks.







The Nectar focus effect in action, allowing your enhanced super-soldier to target enemies more effectively. Here, it's been used to identify the positions of rebel troops as well as find and detonate an environmental explosive, turning a dangerous situation into a duck hunt as long as you don't overdose







multiplayer modes, where you can play as a Mantel trooper with the double-edged sword of Nectar, or as a less powerful but less bipolar rebel. The design of Nectar concentrates on enhancing the fundamental and established mechanics of the genre: "The benefits in terms of the gameplay were driven by thinking about how to enhance the FPS experience," Littlewood explains. "Too many games are built around having a gimmick: 'What can we call a UPS, what can we put on the back of the box?' – it becomes more about marketing than enhancing the player experience, and that's ridiculous." Nectar's implementation within the action is seamless, but the integration with the narrative arc of the story promises to be equally impressive, and though Free Radical remains tight-lipped on specifics there are some exciting indicators (see 'Winners do use drugs'). It's at least clear that to describe Nectar as a simple combat enhancement would be wildly missing the mark.

Alongside Nectar, one of *Haze*'s key gameplay and narrative features is the continuous use of the FPS view, aiming for a seamless immersive experience: no cutscenes, and no loading screens. *Half-Life*, of course, managed this feat admirably, but arguably at the expense of Gordon Freeman's (lack of) character. The crux of *Haze*, on the other hand, is Shane Carpenter's character. Making the storyline entirely synchronic could be a masterstroke, introducing the irreversibility of tragedy into the narrative without removing the sense of control over how that narrative unfolds (and therefore your reaction to that unfolding). The unofficial Free Radical tagline is that *Haze* is 'a war game that becomes a game about war', and the nature of war as opposed to the representation of war in games is a major part of that claim: just how entwined are the military and new game technologies, how desirable and dangerous is free will in a war, and how are those situations created and manipulated by forces beyond any individual's control?

Finding some common ground between the realities of war and a game experience, and tying this into a game narrative, is screenwriter **Rob Yescombe**'s challenge. "If you shoot someone in a game, what do you feel? Triumph. And how much further removed could that be from reality? You look at soldiers who return from battle having shot one guy, and they're traumatised. Yet we'll shoot 100 people and feel triumph: what about guilt, responsibility, even remorse? We're not saying *Haze* can deliver those in a literal sense, but it's something we need to be thinking about and moving towards."

Haze's narrative is certainly a move away from the already tired concept of 'game as interactive movie' and towards gaming's great strengths: the twin concepts of influence and culpability. It's fundamental to Littlewood's vision: "The interesting thing is that the player's sense of complicity in events is much higher than it would be in a film," he explains. "That's something we explore because you can go back and look at something, then say: 'Well, look what you did here' – that's not something that can be done in a movie because, obviously, it's not you that's done it." Themes of war, free will and obedience don't lend themselves to easy solutions or party lines but the futuristic setting allows a freedom to draw parallels without controversy or offence. But despite this emphasis, the most important aspect of *Haze* for the team remains the core gameplay, a balancing act that Yescombe relishes: "We don't want it to be a game where, if you're not interested in the discussion, you won't enjoy it – 50 per cent of audiences didn't get that Starship Troopers was a joke. We want people to play and say: 'This is a great game' and then maybe they'll get the satire and maybe they won't. Our job is to entertain."

"WE WANT PEOPLE TO PLAY AND SAY: 'THIS IS A GREAT GAME' AND THEN MAYBE THEY'LL GET THE SATIRE AND MAYBE THEY WON'T. OUR JOB IS TO ENTERTAIN."



That said, it's clear that *Haze* is responding not just to the technological challenges of the current generation, but a more generalised feeling about games as a whole. "There has been this undercurrent of frustration within certain elements of the industry



Your squad, even at this stage, shows much more than basic intelligence: backing you up, avoiding your direct line of sight and diving for cover, they'll save your skin more than a few times. And if they should die, Mantel quickly sends replacements





Co-ordinated Mantel assaults are lethal and decimate enemy forces. But too much Nectar and your squadmates become more Rambo than Rainbow Six



about the stories you've been able to tell for a while now," explains Littlewood. "It could be about the next gen – but the graphical bells and whistles aren't the massive leaps we've seen in the past – so as developers you have to look beyond the technology to how you change the experience of playing something." And Yescombe sees it as a responsibility for the gaming industry to deal with more mature, and even realistic, subject matter: "It's about what's happening in the world today – it's ludicrous, and how can you make something that doesn't reflect that? Well, you could bury your head in the sand and make *Halo 3*, but the fact of the matter is there are more important things at stake." As well as this bigger picture, your own mortality, obedience and control are explored, and to Yescombe it's clear that the demands made by games are necessarily changing, "because while *Halo* is brilliant, you're a teenager – the next gen is about becoming more mature: in *Haze* you become an adult."

"IT'S ABOUT WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE WORLD TODAY – YOU COULD BURY YOUR HEAD IN THE SAND AND MAKE HALO 3, BUT THE FACT IS THERE ARE MORE IMPORTANT THINGS"

Frustratingly, Free Radical won't elaborate on the role of civilians or non-combatants, only confirming that they will feature in the finished game. Whether we can expect some sort of insurgency sideline has to remain speculation, but one of the benefits of the near-future setting will be the experience of modern guerrilla warfare, both psychological and physical, against your better equipped and theoretically stronger force. But even though you're powerful, you're not Marcus Fenix – "It's one of the game clichés we want to get away from, where you're the one guy, the super-soldier dropped into the middle of this situation and you win the war," says Littlewood. The relative powerlessness of soldiers within conflict is explicit: "Because at the same time as all this stuff's going on in their head, people in those war situations do still fight, either for a cause they believe in." Littlewood explains. "Or because they do what they're told," ends Yescombe. "Confidence in a cause, and an inability to disobey – they're the two things that drive warfare."

It's a world away from what now seem like positively medieval gaming 'solutions' to the thorny issue of combat and realism, such as the reprehensible dodge of green blood, as Yescombe is keen to point out: "games are under the microscope for being a contributor towards violence. And yet we don't even think about it, or have a serious debate other than saying: 'Oh, you shouldn't let your kids play.' That's no argument at all." The war genre in particular has difficulties with the dissociation of games and real life, thanks to the cross-pollination between the industry and the military: if nothing else, the armies that can afford to incorporate variants of commercial game engines in training programmes, and the implications for a real combat situation. Criticising the depiction of war in the average videogame may seem like shooting fish in a barrel, but "there aren't any answers in Haze, because we don't know them," says Littlewood. "Things aren't binary, you don't suddenly reach a point in the game where you flip your allegiance or anything: it's more complex. Reality is deeper than that, and there are grey areas all the way through."

There are still grey areas with Haze, but if Free Radical achieve what they've set out to – if Haze can deliver a first-class FPS experience that invites the player to explore their own motivations and actions within that gameworld – then the rules for an overcrowded and sometimes tired genre will change. It's a big if, and too many of the game's innovations yet exist in whispers and behind closed doors to make rash judgements – but with seven to ten months of development and testing remaining on what already looks a stunning build confidence is inspired. Haze looks like it could be very, very big – and you wouldn't bet against it being very, very clever to match.



Shoot up your friends

As well as straightforward deathmatches (given a tactical bent by your allegiance or otherwise to Mantel) the multiplayer of *Haze* is an extension of the singleplayer experience. "The objectives are story driven" says Yescombe, "we're not just dropping people in environments from the game. Things you are too late to encounter in single player, or miss, or hear rumours about, might crop up in multiplayer." *Haze* will support up to fourplayer co-op online, which will necessitate some superlative AI troops as well as genuine innovation in objectives. Unlike *Timesplitters: Future Perfect* it won't feature a mapmaking option, but the Free Radical pedigree should ensure maps of rare quality – unfortunately, no official announcement has yet been made on the survival or otherwise of the AC -10 award.



(Below and left) Nectar foresight warns you of this grenade's blast radius, and so your similarly pumped-up squadmate sensibly re-positions himself. (Right) One of at least three Mantel vehicles seen thus far, though how many of these are controllable is unconfirmed



SEISMIC MATTERS

INTRODUCING FRACTURE, A THUNDEROUS LUCASARTS SHOOTER THAT SETS OUT TO SPLIT THE WORLD IN TWO

If half the battle of launching an original game is naming it, then LucasArts and Day 1 Studios are already halfway to victory with *Fracture*. "The game was probably the most difficult to name I've ever been involved with," confides Day 1's affable, sharp-eyed president, **Denny Thorley**, but the end result is a multipurpose marketing dream. Not only does *Fracture* possess the requisite duosyllabic snap, it succinctly sums up everything that makes this ambitious new action epic – revealed here for the first time, due in the summer of 2008 – markedly different from the run of the mill.

The first and most important fracture in *Fracture* is geological. Many games have called themselves ground-breaking, but *Fracture* has a literal claim to the term: it lets you break the ground. And raise it, and depress it, and drive spikes up through it, and burrow rockets beneath it, and gather it up into boulders that gouge troughs through it as they roll. This is a thirdperson shooter in which almost every weapon you possess can deform the terrain, and not just in the destructive sense. Cover can be summoned at will, paths to inaccessible areas raised or carved, the ground literally whipped from beneath your enemies' feet. *Fracture* lets you shape the battlefield yourself.

The second fracture is of a nation, and of ideologies. Set on Earth in 2161, *Fracture* portrays the outbreak of a war in the US between the east and west coasts, and their respective allies, over the use of technology. The Atlantic Alliance of eastern America and Europe outlaws the genetic engineering beloved of the west coast and Asia, and conflict flares between their respectively cybernetically and genetically-enhanced troops. The game's hero, Mason Briggs, is a demolition expert on the Atlantic Alliance side, whose adventure begins at the war's flashpoint: San Francisco.

These two aspects of *Fracture* – the terrain deformation that saturates its gameplay and the surprisingly serious and detailed hard sci-fi that is the backdrop for its plot – are strikingly in tune with the mission statement set out last year by a resurgent LucasArts, and discussed in **E**166's cover feature last year. Gameplay innovation through technological innovation, and a commitment to richer narrative in games, are LucasArts hallmarks of old that the company wants to put back at the centre of its philosophy.

It's such a perfect fit on paper that it's almost hard to believe *Fracture* had its genesis outside George Lucas' campus in San Francisco. But it was Day 1, the Chicago-based developer of the *MechAssault* Xbox games for Microsoft and also of the console versions of *FEAR*, that made the pitch after developing the idea and the technology internally. As Thorley says, it was a meeting of minds. "When we went and met Peter [Hirschmann, LucasArts' vice president of development] it was like we could complete each others' sentences, in terms of what we expected. It's kind of a dream from a developer's standpoint, because LucasArts has given us the time and the financial resources to create something pretty special."

Our first introduction to *Fracture* is what Day 1 describes as a 'playground', an open-plan, freeform sandpit – literally – that functions as a demo and design tool. Similar playpens will be included in the final game, possibly integrated into the campaign, possibly as standalone toys. Here we're shown the weapons that mark this game out from every other of its type, starting with the two fundamental, game-defining tools: tectonic and subsonic grenades.

Tectonic grenades raise a steep mound of earth, affectionately called a 'loaf' by the Day 1 team. Drop one in front of you – not too close, to avoid getting caught in the blast radius – and you can use it as cover. Drop one



TITLE: **FRACTURE**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS**
DEVELOPER: **DAY 1**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SUMMER 2008**



POINTS OF VIEW

Fracture began life as a firstperson shooter, and only recently made the switch to thirdperson; the aiming is yet to be tuned, but worked well enough, especially in the de rigeur zoomed-in over-the-shoulder view. "If it's been in development for 18 months, it was firstperson for 16, maybe?" says Perkinson "There are gameplay reasons for it and story reasons for it. If you're going to have a hero character to connect with it helps if that character's on the screen, not just a pair of hands and a gun. Also, with terrain deformation, Day 1 found that it allowed greater freedom to get greater situational awareness. You can do more dramatic things if you're not always occluding your view of the battlefield." Kimmich agrees: "In firstperson you'd spend a lot of time staring at the ground and not seeing what was going on over the other side of your hill. In thirdperson you get that over the top perspective."



under a broken gantry and you can climb up to it. Throw it at your enemies' feet and they will be hurled into the air, but be careful, because a short throw results in cover which they can – and will – use. "If you throw a grenade and miss, you're essentially making your job harder," says eager design lead **Jeff Gregg**. "But you have other tools to fill that hole up or make that situation advantageous to you." Enemies will, of course, have their own terrain-deforming weaponry.

The subsonic grenade is the tectonic's opposite. It too has a conventional explosive effect, but it also punches a deep pit in the ground that can be used as a foxhole, to dig under walls, or to block off enemy movement. Both can furthermore cause physical disturbance and destruction to objects in the game world.

They're simple to use and their effects are smooth, fast and among the most potent and predictable in the game. Already they have as much, if not more, influence over your environment as any shooter weapon since *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun, and have more serious tactical applications too. It's likely they'll take up permanent residence in two of the four grenade slots on the D-pad. We only see two other grenade types, but a comment from Day 1 to the effect that you'll have to pick and choose indicates that there will be more.

The other two grenades we see fall into a second category of weapons to be found in *Fracture*: spectacular, arguably gimmicky, almost unbalanced, deliberately chaotic. They appeal to something that producer and Microsoft veteran **Jon Kimmich** identifies as one of three core elements of a 'Day 1 game': "A sense of exaggerated power, really incredible dynamism and over-the-top effects. When I pull the trigger, when I do something in the game, it's a huge moment." (The other two elements are accessibility and multiplayer; Day 1 isn't ready to speak about the latter yet, beyond an admission from Thorley that it represents a sizeable technical challenge.)

The spike grenade thrusts a tall crystal spike out of the ground that can lift



The Pacificans' genetically engineered suits give them a threatening, alien appearance quite common to shooter antagonists. The storyline and dialogue will, however, progressively humanise your foes

heavy objects or propel the player to high areas, and will shatter into dangerous shards if it hits the ceiling. The vortex grenade creates a tornado of energy that sucks nearby earth, objects and enemies into a whirlwind that intensifies if you fire into it, before exploding messily. Sequences of vortex grenades can even be used to hurl Briggs around the map at speed; one of several examples of a weapon being used in a way Day 1 didn't foresee until playtesting, but have been embraced since.

"As soon as we create something, we find five ways that it can be used that we never intended, which we're really enamoured with," says Thorley. Despite Day 1's traditional devotion to high-impact armaments, *Fracture*'s randomness, fluidity and huge scope for player improvisation has necessitated a shift in attitude. "One of the things we've found out



Fracture is seriously loud and frantic, and the visceral impact of the weapons is huge. But Day 1 is keen to point out that the game can be played in a more 'contemplative' style, depending on how you use the terrain deformation. It will also include exploration-based achievements to encourage non-combat play

"AS SOON AS WE CREATE SOMETHING, WE FIND FIVE WAYS IT CAN BE USED THAT WE NEVER INTENDED, WHICH WE'RE REALLY ENAMOURED WITH. ONE OF THE THINGS WE'VE FOUND OUT IS THAT CHAOS IS FUN"

playing the game is that chaos is fun. We really had to get away from things we'd learned from other shooters that we've been involved with, and go to a little bit crazier and more chaotic level."

Fracture's firearms are slightly more conventional and down-to-earth than its grenades, with one notable exception, but they all still have terrain deformation effects. You'll be able to carry two at a time, the ubiquitous design lift from *Halo* that does make sense in *Fracture*'s context. The freedom of choice is so broad in this game that you won't explore its possibilities fully without a little limitation.

The Bulldog is a machine gun that chips away at terrain, allowing you to carve steps in a steep slope or a firing point in your cover. The Invader is a shotgun that raises terrain slightly and has a slow, ricocheting round on secondary fire that explodes when you release the trigger, making it possible to shoot round corners. The Black Widow can accurately plant several subsonic mines and then detonate them simultaneously, ideal for booby-traps or quick trench-digging.

The Bangalore is the Vortex-style spectacle, with a terrain-deforming rocket on primary fire and a torpedo that tunnels underground on secondary, exploding when you release the trigger with a dramatic slow-motion effect. But the unhinged highlight is the unofficially-named 'boulder gun'. This ludicrous, enormously entertaining weapon sucks the earth up into a man-high boulder and launches it forwards, knocking down Pacificans like skittles. And it can be detonated like a huge bomb, by shooting it.

The boulder gun is still a prototype, a rough idea sketched out by a designer that has was initially thought a bit silly at Day 1, but has simply proved irresistible in practice. It's a great example of the sudden enthusiasm for free-thinking design at the technocratic developer, prompted by its terrain deformation concept. Alongside the enormous demands of

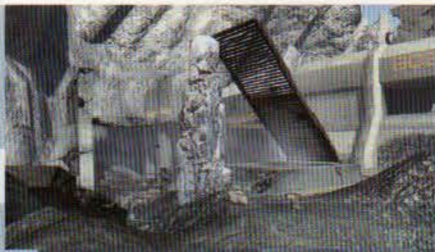


DESIGN FOR LIFE

Terrain deformation throws up constant problems for Day 1's designers as they attempt to work around the violence the player can do to their environments without artificially restricting it – an example being the landing area for a dropship: what if the player raises the ground there? "The old-school thinking would have been to put a big slab of concrete there, so you can't deform the terrain at all," says Kimmich, but what they've actually done is give the dropship its own deformation weapons. "We're all about empowering the player," says Gregg. "Any time we find ourselves constricting in that way, and we've had numerous design meetings and discussions where we find that we're constraining because something we've allowed to have happen is hard to control on our end – the philosophy has been, let's pump up the strength, let's find a way to adopt what we're trying to accomplish, and allow the things we see the player doing to exist as well. Nine times out of ten, if the player is trying to do something, it's probably something cool."







Day 1's proprietary technologies were already too far down the road to use the physics and animation systems LucasArts has licensed. But despite his company's scepticism of middleware, McDonald declared himself very impressed by them



the terrain deformation and its knock-on effects (on AI and animation in particular), Day 1's engineers have worked hard to produce tools that will allow its designers to improvise as much as, it's hoped, players will.

"These weapons that you're seeing, the first iterations were done on some of those by a designer before a programmer even got involved. The boulder for example," says **Mike McDonald**, technical chief as well as director of its second studio near Baltimore. "It didn't run as fast as it does now we've done it in code, but it gave them the ability to prototype that stuff out. That's huge in the discovery and innovation process, to not have a bottleneck of two or three engineers. If the tools aren't easy to use, if they're not full-featured enough that they [the artists and designers] can just do everything they want to do with minimal engineering support, then we consider we've failed."

In our very own playtest, the boulder gun also provides a perfect illustration of the happy, unforseeable accidents constantly thrown up by *Fracture*'s riotous arsenal, and how admirably open Day 1's design team is to them. At one point in the first level you're required to warp the earth to allow you access to the first floor of a concrete bunker, defended by a squad of Pacificans. Having constructed a sort of scooped ramp from the neighbouring hillside, it was impossible to resist trying to bowl a rock down it and into the bunker and the waiting Pacificans. On the third attempt it entered – and, to howls of delight from all present, it stuck in the back of the corridor, cutting off the enemies' exit and some of their cover.

"I've never seen anyone try that before," said Gregg, visibly excited by the fact his game could still surprise him. "What went through my head was, uh, I don't know if that AI is set up to know that that's blocked, and it just worked. I'm going to design areas around that now. I'm no genius – I see stuff like that and I'm smart enough to say, we're going to work that in, that is awesome."



Although absolutely not confirmed as part of the final release, Day 1 does have co-op up and running in the game. It's used for AI prototyping, with Thorley playing villain to Gregg's hero as a way to work out consistent and entertaining behaviour

This attitude is important because *Fracture*'s design has a difficult line to walk. Notwithstanding the influence and creative freedom it affords the player – and the fact that it consequently plays out over a broader field than usual – this is still a sculpted, channelled shooter in the modern mould, with a distinct story arc to follow. It is a game of carefully-constructed set-pieces in which anything can happen.

The early sequence we play tasks Briggs with destroying two anti-aircraft batteries, covering a dropship landing, fighting through a complex and raising a sabotaged bridge. It runs from tight firefights to open skirmishing, from navigation and puzzle-solving to almost surreal physics games, and plays out in a dried-out San Francisco bay, the Golden Gate bridge towering eerily high above the scene.

The anti-aircraft guns are destroyed by planting tectonic grenades beneath them to raise them into the shields they're surrounded with. Invader rounds are bounced around the inside of a bunker. Hyrdras – spooky, Bangalore-wielding Pacificans who can leap huge distances and only attack from high ground – are dealt with by riding a grenade spike to their level. Platforms are created by placing tectonic grenades under crates, the bridge fixed with a gigantic version of the spike that enemies wear down with their weapons. In one sequence you're attacked from the top of a slope with large, bouncing, explosive hydrogen balls – a ludicrous weapon that justifies its existence purely by being so

CORE COMPETENCE

Asked what the biggest challenge was for Day 1's engineers – terrain deformation, or the consequences of terrain deformation – McDonald says: "A little bit of both. Or I should say, a lot of both. The terrain deformation itself, how we're doing it, is not something that would have been possible on a previous generation box. There's a lot of computational power that goes into doing it in a smooth fashion. When that's happening, how the AIs can path in that environment, and obviously all the physics, are being affected, and have gotten way more expensive. We couldn't have done stuff we're doing now on a previous generation box because now we have to take that physics load and spread that over multiple processors too. That multi-core architecture is definitely key." They haven't been tempted to buy in solutions rather than engineer their own, though. "My experience has been, when you're trying to eke that last bit of performance out and you look for your glitches or your hitches or whatever, inevitably it's some code that you had to purchase or that you don't have by-the-balls control of," says Thorley.











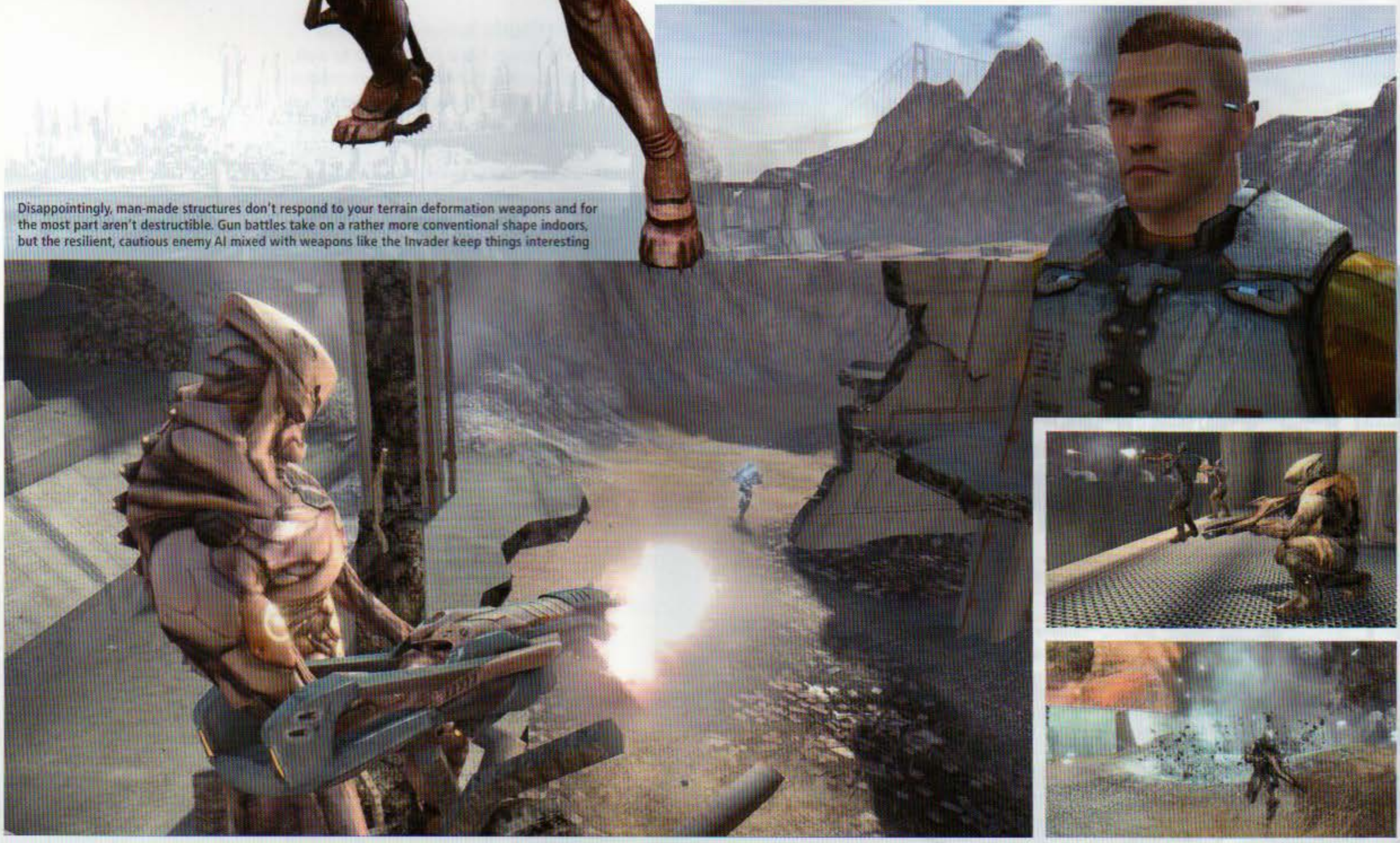
much fun to deal with in context. You can use the Black Widow to pit the slope and disrupt their path, tectonics to create a ramp to send them over your head, or (in Gregg's favoured method) spikes, to start a gigantic, deadly game of pachinko.

It can be an unreal world that *Fracture* presents, the better to exploit the chaotic fun of its terrain deformation. But it's one that Day 1, under LucasArts' guidance, is working hard to ground it in recognisable themes and thorough detail. Cinematics director **Peter Krygowski** (Thorley prefers to call him the 'emotion director') is the man tasked with humanising its pop-up playground. He's worked out a careful future history to get us from here to there, including an opinion-dividing genetic engineering disaster towards the end of the 21st century, and a cycle of climate-change disasters that inspire the technology and create the familiar-yet-alien US landscape that the game plays out in.

"Wikipedia's a lot of fun," says the studious Krygowski drily of his research into the weapon technologies. "The Bangalore, for instance, is based on liquefaction technology. The terrible earthquake that hits the west coast of the United States is a horrendous blow to the US, but they learn a lot from it about how earthquakes work, about how sound works, about how liquefaction actually makes the earth soft underground."

"I kinda geek out on thinking about how this stuff could really work," agrees art director **Josh Nizzi**.

If all this detail can be communicated alongside Briggs' traditional (and as yet under wraps) personal narrative, it could give *Fracture*'s world the scope and tone of literary sci-fi rather than film fantasy, a rare feat in games. It's already provided, if the re-imagined Bay Area is anything to go by, some striking locations: "We use both familiarity and unfamiliarity as tools," explains Nizzi.



Disappointingly, man-made structures don't respond to your terrain deformation weapons and for the most part aren't destructible. Gun battles take on a rather more conventional shape indoors, but the resilient, cautious enemy AI mixed with weapons like the Invader keep things interesting





Mason Briggs is promised a compelling "personal story set inside a big epic event," according to Krygowski

As much as LucasArts producer **David Perkinson** likes to stress how strong his company's emphasis on story and character is, and how closely it's working with Day 1 in this field, it's where *Fracture* currently has the most to prove. The setting is fascinating but the presentation is a rather conventional dystopian future, all stressed concrete, dustbowls, hulking Atlantic vehicles contrasting with organic Pacifican tech. *Fracture* doesn't play like any other shooter but it looks like quite a lot of them: can it really meet LucasArts' president Jim Ward's demands for massmarket accessibility when, outwardly, it seems aimed squarely at the infamous 'core gamer'?

"Certainly those are discussions we've had a lot throughout the development of the game," confirms Perkinson. "We're very sensitive to making the game appeal to too narrow an audience. We are constantly charged with keeping the experience open to all levels of gamers and just last week, Jim said: 'I will not ship this game if I can't finish it'."

A strong, distinctive self-image is what *Fracture* needs if it's going to capitalise on the irrepressible innovation in its gameplay, and do what LucasArts wants and needs it to do: give it a major success in original IP to sit alongside its priceless but overworked movie properties. "There was a perception that we do Indy and Star Wars. And there are people there who feel like the company is able to do a lot more interesting things," says Perkinson. "George has made it very clear that LucasArts is going to be one of the main pistons firing in the engine for generating revenue for his company, and the best way to do that is for us to have new IP that is going to generate a lot of interest."

Thorley is unsurprisingly full of praise for his new paymasters. "We've worked with publishers that would really clamp you down to milestones, got to have this, got to have that. At LucasArts it's a little bit different, it's like, you've got to innovate, innovate, innovate. Iterate and have fun! Also, because they do less titles, it gets more focused at a much more senior level. It's kind of unique because it's really good feedback when you've got people like Peter or even Jim that can give you really viable input."

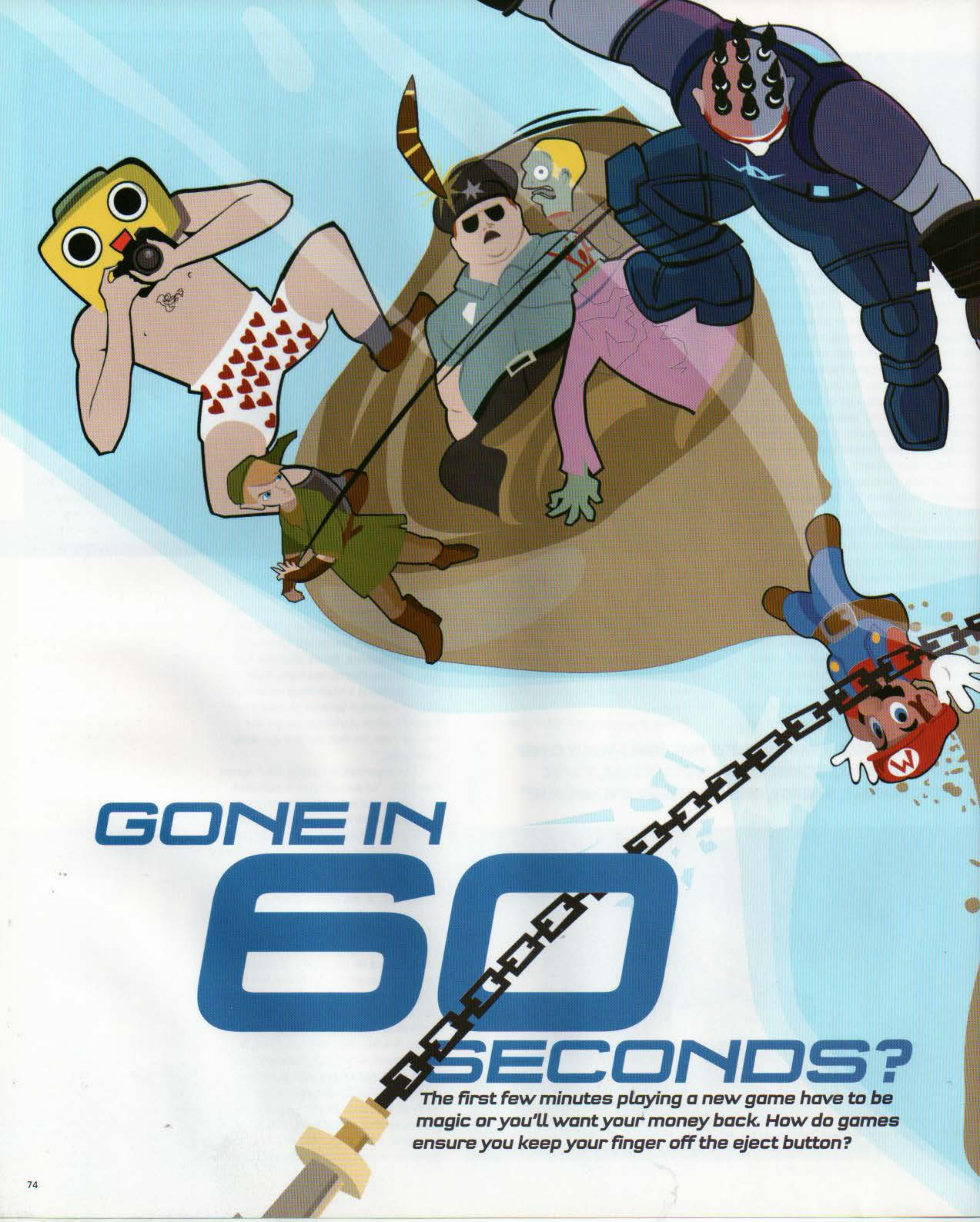
"WE'VE WORKED WITH PUBLISHERS THAT WOULD REALLY CLAMP YOU DOWN TO MILESTONES. AT LUCASARTS IT'S LIKE, YOU'VE GOT TO INNOVATE, INNOVATE, INNOVATE. ITERATE AND HAVE FUN!"

"Our organisation is pretty flat," agrees Perkinson. "So we will present individual story bits all the way up to the president of the company. Mr Lucas has made a few comments on the game," he adds. "How cool is that? That is so cool," bellows Thorley. "It's also pretty scary," says Perkinson in a small voice.

As much as this sounds like corporate back-slapping, there is clearly an unusual rapport between Day 1 and LucasArts. The publisher's considerable financial backing and insistence on technical and design innovation has set this developer free to really start riffing on its simple, earth-moving idea, and the sense of excitement and of liberated conceptions is palpable in Day 1's offices. *Fracture*, with over a year left in development, is looking remarkably solid, playing well and setting itself apart from its rivals and Day 1's past games. But it's still flexible enough to accommodate the good ideas that are still being dug up, on a daily basis, from its ever-shifting, gloriously unpredictable landscape.

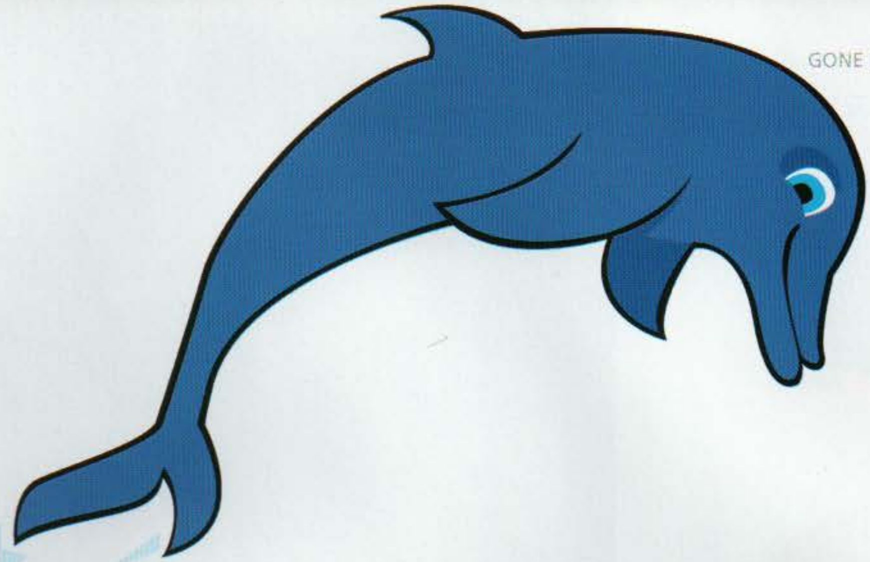


The one area where Day 1's technicians had to draw a line under ambition and say 'no' was water. It was simply too difficult and demanding of processing power to make it respond believably to terrain deformation. Just as well 2161 is an arid time



GONE IN 60 SECONDS?

The first few minutes playing a new game have to be magic or you'll want your money back. How do games ensure you keep your finger off the eject button?



It's said that we form opinions about the things around us incredibly quickly. Blink, they say, and we've come to our conclusion, even if we can't yet consciously define how.

Videogames have known for years about the importance of the formative moments players spend with them. The simplicity of classic arcade game design isn't just due to hardware restriction, but the need to communicate how and why a cabinet should be played before the punter has walked past it.

Though the audience for home computers and consoles could be considered a little more captive, it's still the subject of a multitude of other entertainment options that continuously compete for attention. Their opening few minutes of play have taken the place of arcade games' attempts to lure players in with their attract modes. And with each of the new generation of consoles offering a constantly updated selection of games and demos for easy download, the pressure to impress fast is stronger than ever.

But as games attempt to tell ever more complex narratives, utilise ever more complex or inventive control schemes, and exhibit more intricate game designs, they're making the job of introducing themselves well in that short time harder and harder.

And they need to do so much. Ex-LucasArts designer **Hal Barwood** might make it sound simple when he says: "Grab the player early and hard, give them an immediate challenge that's fun, demonstrate the game's parameters and make the prospects intriguing." But in these principles lie the complexities of the need to teach the player the controls, set up the storyline – show characters' desires and needs, the forces working against them and what's at stake – and somehow make it all fun and compelling.



GOLDENEYE 007
N64, Rare, 1997



It's a sobering thought that today, *GoldenEye*'s first level would probably never get past testing. Many of its features at the time of release were recent or new concepts – new guns, aiming, complex mission objectives – yet *GoldenEye* drops new players straight into the action without so much as a tutorial.

But as a taster of the larger game, it's superlative. It demonstrates an array of different environments, from open spaces to tight corridors. Though the first level was set at a dam because the game follows the plot of the film, Rare used the opportunity to show off the rendering power of the then new N64 with vast vistas. It was also an environment that made best use of one of the new toys, notably the sniper rifle, which Rare made available within seconds of starting. "There was also the feeling that if you give it to the player early enough they'll experiment with it," says *GoldenEye* co-designer Doak.

The dam level also demonstrates a variety of different enemy behaviours, such as the man in the area with the truck making a run for the alarm as soon as you enter. "He's got the most ridiculously long run for the alarm – even the worst player will probably shoot him," says Doak. "But that was deliberate, to show there were characters that didn't just shoot you."

The challenge was to keep the level easy whilst lending a sense of complexity and activity through the movement of the truck and the number of enemies. In fact, the two soldiers in the very first area can't actually see you until you're right next to them. "It meant that at the very start of the game you could mess around and not be slaughtered," says Doak.

But though this aspect of the level might have been easy, the way the mission objectives work are somewhat uncompromising. A 'covert modem' must be precisely placed on a rather arbitrary screen – fail to place correctly and you have to restart. "It's terribly badly designed, but ten years ago people tolerated that!"



God Of War II pulls a similar trick to its predecessor, pitching Kratos into a boss battle with the Colossus of Rhodes within only a few minutes of starting. It's a startling break from the norm



A popular method is the spectacular set-piece, a sequence of graphical showmanship and deceptively frenetic gameplay that can be great at establishing plot and character motivations, and give opportunity to tutor the controls. Think *God Of War*, which opens with player character Kratos contemplating suicide on a cliff. A voiceover begins explaining why, and the scene flashes back to Kratos in the middle of a battle.

"David Jaffe and company nailed this one on so many levels," says ex-Naughty Dog creative director **Daniel Arey**. "Bear in mind this all happens in 30 seconds and you are pushing buttons by the 31st second. There is no slow, overly worded exposition here – Kratos fights, player gets some fun, and in one minute 20 seconds for the average player, they get the first 'Oh, my God!' when the Hydra smashes through the boat and you have a boss fight. A boss fight in one minute! It's a great piece of work."

But with such ambition comes the danger that the rest of the game doesn't quite live up to the promise that the opening sets. As Barwood says: "That first impression will carry the player through another hour, and then the designer must have something else up their sleeve to deepen the pleasures and the mysteries of any game."

"A first impression will carry the player through an hour, and then the designer must have something else up their sleeve"



Barney, an old face from *Half-Life*, appears in disguise during the opening of *HL2* and provides Freeman with his trademark crowbar, changing play from passive experience to combat

Others go for a more subtle approach, such as *Half-Life 2*, which gives control to the player after minimal cutscene exposition. Without weapons and other distractions, the sequence allows them to walk freely through a carefully orchestrated environment, soaking up the atmosphere and learning how things work from scripted behaviours of non-player characters and from the environmental design.

Other games are tricksier, such as the opening to *Metal Gear Solid 2*, which manages to fool its players about the character they'd be playing the main game as with an extended playable prologue. Setting the action on a ship





Metal Gear Solid 2 players were wrongfooted by the game's opening section, as the bulk of the game was played as an entirely different character













in a storm – a familiar and symmetrical environment – is suitably dramatic yet provides an easy introduction to its play style. And it even includes the game's great set-pieces – the holds filled with soldiers – and gives them a look at Metal Gear even before the main credits are over. It's blockbuster stuff, yet holds a light to the *Metal Gear* series' playful nature.

Differently tricksy is *Dead Rising*, which gives control to the player during the opening cinematic by allowing them to photograph zombie-infested streets from a helicopter in a clever subversion of an on-rails shooter. It teaches nothing of how you'll be playing the game – or even what kind of game *Dead Rising* is – but it brilliantly sets up the player character and the game setting.

Dead Rising exposes another aspect of game openings, too. Many players' first experiences with it weren't actually with the full game but with its popular demo, which was made available over Xbox Live some months before release. Set in a closed section of the game's mall, it gave 15 minutes of freeform zombie-bashing before it ended. Such freedom rather confused prospective players, who found the main game required them to adhere to its rather strict plot timetable to experience the full game.

It was a similar story to how the *Crackdown* demo was received, which allowed over 30 minutes of freeform play. Though a great showcase of the full game's qualities, many



Dead Rising players want to be in the mall hitting zombies with a park bench, but the game rations out this visceral glee in its opening hours using cutscenes and its save system



players found the demo's accelerated development of the player character's abilities initially made it more focused and fun to play.

Some games drop their players right into the action in a kind of trial by fire, such as *Resident Evil 2*, which surrounds the player with zombies in a constricted environment. Openings to sequels like this almost seem as if they're expecting their players to have played the previous games to have the skills and experience to get through them. Though a standalone game, *Eternal Darkness* went for a similarly disconcerting first few minutes by putting the player into a no-win fight against multiple enemies before the character wakes up to find it was all a dream. These examples, both strongly narrative-driven, communicate the game's attitude right from the start.

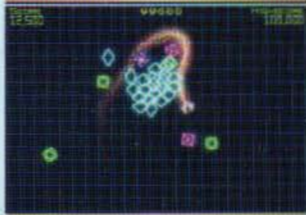
Similarly, *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* opens with the player controlling Richter Belmont in a fight with the game's end boss, Dracula. It's actually a reprise of the close of the previous game in the series' overstory, *Dracula X*, complete with a similar rendition of its HUD. To mitigate the difficulty of thrusting the player straight into a climactic battle, the player character is made invincible if he dies, but the sequence dramatically establishes the game in the context of its predecessors.

In one of *SOTN*'s many appropriations of *Metroid* game design, the opening also features the main character, Alucard, losing his powers within a minute of entering Dracula's castle. His



GEOMETRY WARS

Xbox/360, 2003/2005



The big challenge for designing the first couple of minutes for a single-level arcade shooter like *Geometry Wars* is balance. It has to ease new players into the game and yet provide an experience that won't bore players on their eighth, 50th or 1,000th replays.

"We initially decided to focus *Geometry Wars* on hardcore gamers, but we didn't want it to be exclusively for them, so I went for a start that was quite easy and smooth," says designer Cakebread. "Some people playing the game probably don't get past the 10,000 points, so it was necessary for them."

The contrast between *Geometry Wars'* quiet opening and the spectacular intensity it reaches just a few minutes later can be a shock. "In retrospect I could have been more aggressive at the start, perhaps, and more lenient as to when I say, 'This person is good; let's accelerate the game'. But I don't think it was too bad," he says.

A player's first minutes of playing *Geometry Wars* are spread over several games, surviving a minute, then an extra few seconds, then a few more – learning the different enemies as they're introduced, one by one. Without help text or tutorial, *Geometry Wars* is its own unambiguous teacher, letting experience teach the strategies and skills necessary to survive longer.

Crucially, however, to everyone apart than the supernaturally good players, *Geometry Wars* will always hit a point at which the action reaches an intensity they're unable to cope with. In other words, the game's first two minutes can feel just as chaotic to a new player as later stages can to a better one. Such scaling is the measure of *Geometry Wars'* success as an arcade game: it communicates its essential qualities right from the very first go.

losses are restricted to powerful attacks rather than actual abilities, but it's a hallmark of the *Metroid* series that Samus Aran spends the very first part of the game with abilities such as her morph ball, missiles and grapple beam, before losing them all and spending much of the rest of the game locating them again. It's a design filled with tension: whilst it affords a chance to get a taste of (and tutorials in) some of your abilities and a suitably gripping fall from grace, it's also frustrating to suddenly be parted from them.



Years before *God Of War*, *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* started with a boss fight, albeit one from another game and time. It used *Metroid's* trick of removing your abilities, too

Without a strong story to sweep the player along, the first few moments of play in an arcade-style game are probably even more critical. How long it takes to ensure a Xbox Live Arcade demo is upgraded into the full game differs from title to title, but as *Geometry Wars* designer **Stephen Cakebread** says: "What matters is how long it takes to understand the game. Then it's about how your game is different from others of its type."

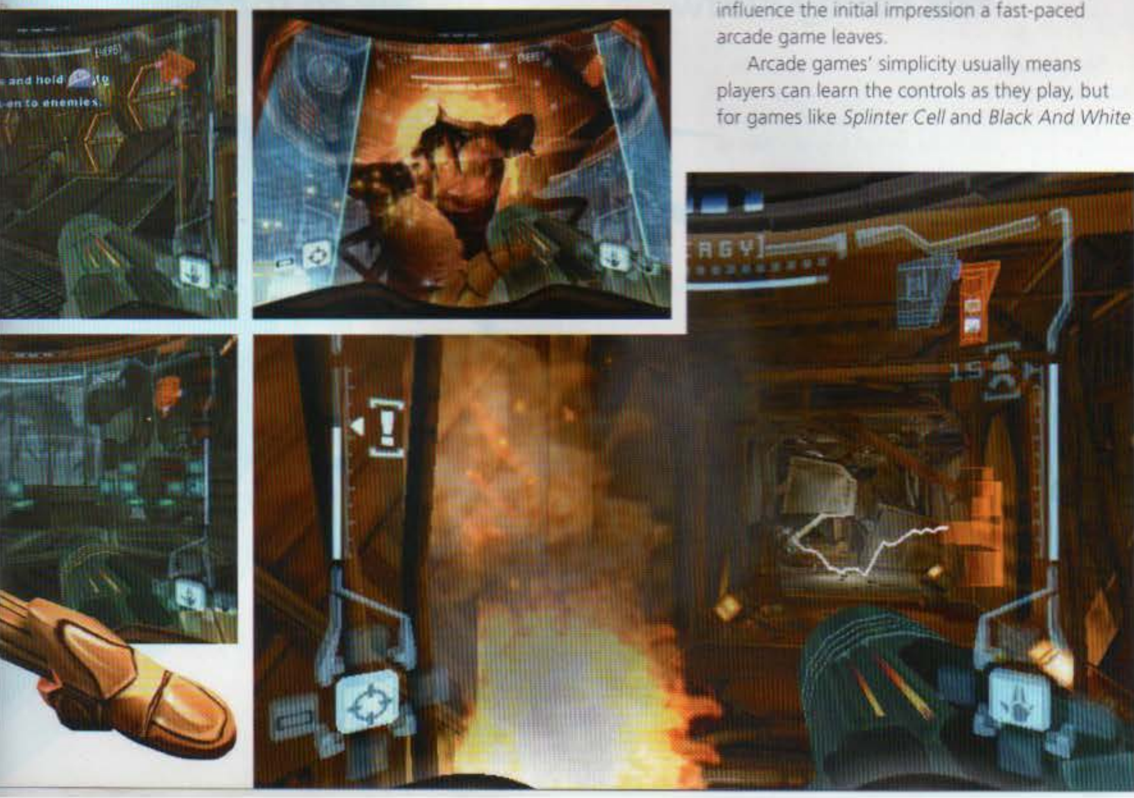
> "What matters is how long it takes to understand the game. Then it's about how your game is different from others of its type"

The arcade game experience also tends to extend beyond playing the game itself and into the menu systems and scoreboards. It's a lesson that Bizarre Creations, developer of *Geometry Wars* and *Boom Boom Rocket* [see page 88] is learning. "With hindsight, in *Boom Boom Rocket* we could have been better about teaching the player that it isn't about doing each of the levels and you're finished, it's about replaying each one so songs echo in your brain every time you play it, again and again, trying to perfect your score," says Bizarre's **Ben Ward**.

"Part of that is the user interface," says Cakebread. "Many people say the UI, like the level select screen, is a meta-game running on top of the game, so it's about making sure that the UI tells players how to approach it." Even tiny things, like the default position the menu takes when you restart a game, can influence the initial impression a fast-paced arcade game leaves.

Arcade games' simplicity usually means players can learn the controls as they play, but for games like *Splinter Cell* and *Black And White*

Metroid Prime teases players by having them fully tooled-up at the start, then snatching their toys away from them for later rediscovery and utilisation



INDIANA JONES AND THE FATE OF ATLANTIS

PC, LucasArts, 1992



Most narrative-based games start with a mountain of exposition, putting plot, character and setting into place before finally handing control over their players, who then have to go through the process of learning the interface. It can be gruelling experience, one common even to many of the great early-'90s LucasArts adventure games.

Fate Of Atlantis **bucked the trend, though, by giving the player control from the start. Opening in what looks like relic-filled stone tomb with Indy telling you that he's looking for a statue, the sequence progresses when you click on the right bit of scenery and Indy falls through to a room below. Clicking on a rope leading through a trapdoor causes him to fall once again, and we realise he's actually in an archive. A couple of pratfalls later, and Indy's in the basement with his statue to be finally found in a locker.**

Interspersed with credits and featuring a MIDI rendition of John Williams' Indiana Jones theme, *Fate Of Atlantis'* opening elegantly fuses all that a non-interactive animation would with a gentle introduction to the point-and-click interface. "We wanted to establish the basis of a Jonesy story, and the plot, cooked up for the immense, Russian-novel-size requirements of game-stories, had some complexity, so we thought it better start immediately without any fooling around," says project lead designer, Hal Barwood.

The following cinematic, which sees the statue's contents stolen by a dastardly Nazi, was originally going go on to introduce the heroine, Sophia Hapgood, but LucasArts found the exposition too heavy. "So we sliced it to the bone and made it nominally interactive," says Barwood. He and co-designer Noah Falstein this time interspersed conversations and some gentle puzzles between short cinematics that flesh out the story in themselves.

The result is a subtle and entertaining teaser to the game that neither cloyingly handholds nor dully expounds, yet communicates both a complicated back-story and the game's light-hearted attitude.









Ecco The Dolphin begins in peaceful waters full of your podmates who gradually introduce you to the mechanics of control underwater, before a storm mercilessly sweeps them away

the burden of teaching them is heavy. It's common for a storm of pop-up text boxes and demands for specific actions to obtrusively punctuate the first minutes of a new game. "It always amuses me because they feel like hardcore gamers trying to explain something to casual gamers, and not really knowing what to say to them," says **David Doak** of Free Radical Design.

In some games this method can jar with the overall mood, such as *Viva Piñata*, which assaults its player with a blizzard of tips, awards and instructions in its first half hour. Not only can it be confusing, but it also belies the main game's relaxed playing style.

Many games make the player character a new recruit requiring training, an increasingly clichéd way of putting the player through a boring boot camp too. *Call Of Duty 2*'s elegant solution is to allow the boot camp to also say something of the Russian soldier in Stalingrad's experience by showing how ramshackle the operation is – you have to throw potatoes during the grenade tutorial – and how green these soldiers were: a German attack quickly ends it, throwing you into an intense battle.

"Tutorials feel like hardcore gamers trying to explain something to casual gamers, and not really knowing what to say to them"

Some games have a more shrewd approach. *Halo* famously asks whether a player wants inverted controls from within the game's story by having a technician character tell Master Chief to look up and deriving the answer from their action. *Half-Life 2*, too, teaches some of its controls and introduces its physics by having a belligerent station guard tell the player to pick up rubbish off the floor and throw it into a bin.



The exterior of _Super Mario 64_'s castle, a large playground full of the kind of dips and architecture that are perfect for trying out your new camera, as well as wall jumps and stomps

But while contextualising tutorials into the game's narrative can make them less jarring to go through, they can still be irritating for many players. After all, few control schemes are markedly different from those already burned into experienced players' synapses. Yet even *Halo* demands that its players jump through hoops to get through the first few minutes.

"They just have this lowest common denominator expectation and everyone has to do the same thing," says Doak. "Really, what they should be is like a good teacher; they should look at what you're doing and tell you how to do things you're struggling with. The best thing would be to have something clever that works out what you're doing, but of course cleverness can be its own downfall."

One of the most beautifully paced tutorials in a game is that in *Civilisation*, which doesn't need to be clever at all. It uses the structure of







Viva Piñata starts off with a canvas not so much blank as covered in debris, sparking off a riot of spade-related destruction that tails off into soil-whacking and a torrent of hints and tips before the first potential visitor wriggles into view. It's worth it in the end, though

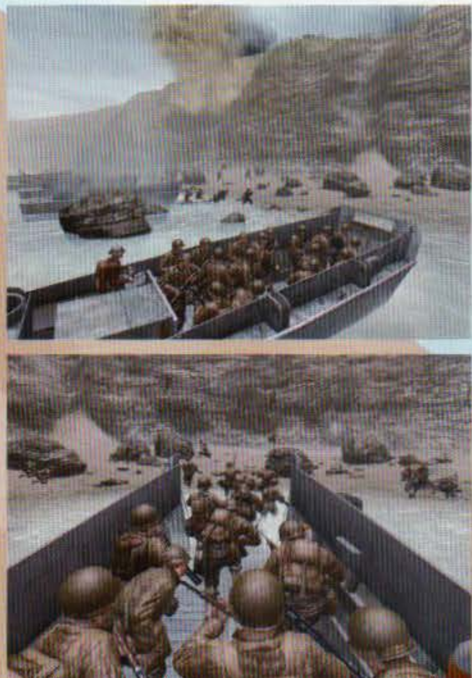


the game – the slow, measured progress of your civilisation – to do the teaching for it. The complexity of what you're doing increases as your knowledge does, scaling from the ins and outs of establishing your first settlement to managing entire cities and armies. *Civilisation*'s seemingly effortless solution to introducing itself is to let play, with a few pointers here and there to explain the details, dictate those first minutes with it.

It's a characteristic *Civilisation* shares with *Super Mario 64* and *Ecco The Dolphin*, which open in a playground in which players can develop their skills at their own pace. Both games had a lot to teach their players on release because they were both, in their own ways, divergent from their contemporaries. Ecco's drifting swimming style and tricks had to be mastered before entering the spike-infested passages in the rest of the game. And *Super Mario 64* managed to successfully teach its players how to play games in a whole new dimension.

Though these examples are all of games created over ten years ago, their freedoms still have much to teach modern ones. And as Doak says, perhaps our increasingly information-rich world is making them even more relevant: "The internet generation is very good at very quickly picking up information from something that seems chaotic," he argues. "I often wonder when I play through those plodding tutorials whether they're being written by old men."

So maybe videogames should do a little less handholding and trust in their players more? It might not make the challenge of designing those opening minutes any easier, but there is nothing more compelling about a game than the experience of simply playing it.



Call Of Duty 2 took the decision not to open with the usual storming of a D-Day beach, instead setting it at the start of its third chapter. Players by then had amassed enough skills for them to be able to tackle a sequence that was as lethal as the scenario should be

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

42 All Time Classics



It's when you start having arguments about the finer points of Koi-Koi that you realise that the train-journey time-killer has become an everyday obsession
DS, NINTENDO

Final Fantasy XII



Bread? Water? The staples of life are now licence boards and gambit systems. And pretty, pretty colours. Remember when lunch hours had something to do with eating?
PS2, SQUARE ENIX

Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion



If only the game offered some kind of distinct conclusion it might just be possible to stop playing. Thank Sithis that Bethesda will not be releasing any more expansions
360, TAKE-TWO

Wherefore art thou Mario?

Why he's so much more than a mascot



The reception to *Mario Galaxy*'s debut demonstrated just how detailed and demanding the expectations for a *Mario* game still are

Read a review of a Mario spin-off, and you're more than likely to find a run-down of his famous careers – an increasingly tired laundry list: racing driver, plumber, doctor, umpire, etc, etc. And this month, with three *Mario* games on offer (*Super Paper Mario*, the DS sequel to *Mario Vs Donkey Kong* and the Wii's *Mario Strikers*), there's more chances than ever to dust that list off and add another line.

But just as familiar as that list is the assumption for the reasoning behind that 200-strong catalogue of cash-in titles. Nintendo puts Mario in games because it helps them sell. Consumers know and trust him, so his presence, however incongruous, is a seal of quality. It's simple, rapacious profiteering by a company smart enough to know that if it wants to keep milking its cash plumber, it'd better take good care of the games it exhibits him in.

But what if that's looking at it backwards? What if the big difference that Mario being in a game makes isn't to us consumers, but to those designers? Imagine just how much would change about your design document if Miyamoto wandered in and changed that one word about your game's hero, scoring out the name you'd given him and writing in those five magic letters.

Just like that, your game is lumbering under a crushing weight of expectation. Just like that there's an encylopaedic cast of characters, rulesets and in-jokes to draw on. Just like that, the simplest action has to deliver the kind of infectious happiness that Mario brings to moving through his worlds. Just like that you know how everything must look. Your sound effects: boings; your currency: coins. Just like that you're designing for one of the most varied demographics in the world. Just like that you have to measure every inch of your game against the best ever made.

Of course, that's rarely, if ever, the way round the decision gets made. Nintendo is far too savvy – and that initial analysis far too close on the money – to be making impulsive decisions about where to deploy its single most valuable asset. But rather than wondering how many B-list games have tarnished Mario's reputation for players, we should perhaps be wondering how many D-list games his presence has elevated much closer to greatness.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



SUPER PAPER MARIO

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: $50 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US) SUMMER (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E175





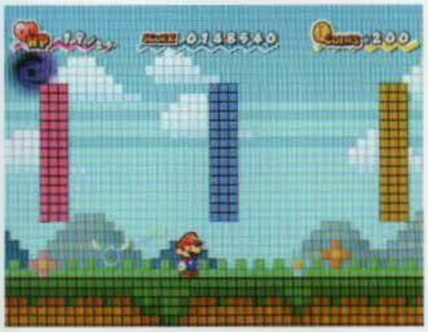
A small element of the carefully timed action moves from previous games' combat is retained in style points, awarded for waggling the Remote as you land on an enemy's head, and in the power-up techniques for items (above)

After years of patiently explaining to friends that it isn't a platform game, fans of the *Mario RPG* series are faced with a new challenge. While *Super Paper Mario* may firmly belong to that lineage that started on the SNES and has evolved through previous *Paper Marios* and the *Mario & Luigi* handheld offshoots, the twist in its tale is that it *is* a platform game. And an RPG. And a puzzle game. And an action game. Starring Mario. And Luigi. And Peach. And Boswer. Set in the Mushroom Kingdom. And outer space. And alternate dimensions. In 2D. And 3D. With conventional controls. And motion-sensing controls. Perhaps fans of the series are facing more than one new challenge.

Super Paper Mario's main evolution isn't, as you might expect for a game that started on GameCube and graduated to Wii, in its controls. Instead, the real shift is in its combat. Where the series once took RPG conventions fairly seriously, requiring Mario to line-dance, wait his turn and pick his attack off a menu, it now lets him return to his head-stomping instincts. Although items and temporary stat-boosters can be called on from his inventory, run-and-jump basics prevail. But if it doesn't quite feel like an RPG any more, nor does it quite feel like a platform game. *SPM's* central invention – that its 2D levels can be skewed into 3D, pulling the camera round behind Mario to let you look ahead rather than just side-on – makes it a game of curious exploration and lateral thinking rather than lightning reactions and pixel precision. But it isn't quite a puzzler, either: although it takes much longer for the wow factor of the perspective shift to fade than you might think, there's little need to move beyond the basic rule of thumb that sees you switching to 3D whenever you seem stuck.

And that hodge-podge of styles is reflected in the visuals. The last *Paper Mario* game, the GameCube's *Thousand Year Door*, was stunningly beautiful in places, taking a slightly avant-garde approach to Mario's traditional settings, but *Super Paper Mario* throws caution to the winds, with cubist enemies, monochrome dimensions with Spirograph stars, 8bit nostalgia and equations in the sky. Each artistic indulgence, in and of itself, is laudable – it's a rare treat to see games shake themselves free of tradition with such abandon. But together they feel mismatched – a rag-bag of styles lacking a coherent vision.





The 2D/3D switch means that what look like identical pillars (above) are revealed as a set of statues (top). Use the 3D footholds to get to the top, and then swap back to hop across

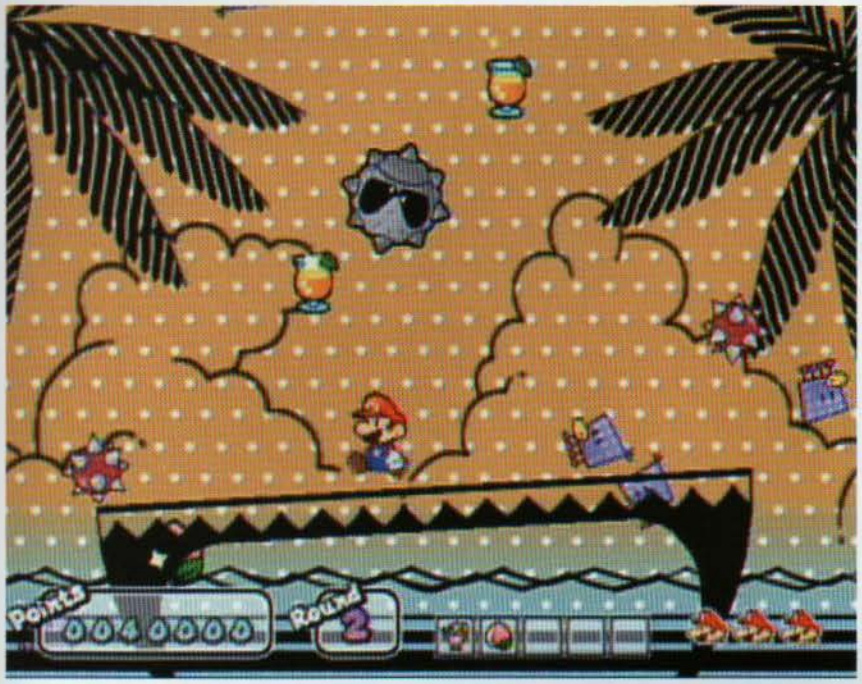


A similar theme runs through the gameplay. *SPM's* story, which pokes wry fun at the *Mario* tradition by seeing Bowser kidnapped alongside Peach, and the princess summarily rescued by an unseen hand and dropped at Mario's feet, calls for four heroes to save the day. These can be swapped at will, and each has a special ability, like Peach's umbrella float and Bowser's fire breath. Whoever you play as, you're always accompanied by a little flying adviser, a Pixl called Tippi, who can offer advice and clues as to where to go next. Point the Remote at the screen, and she becomes a spotlight, freezing the action as she explains about enemies or objects on-screen, and reveals hidden blocks and items. Nor is she alone – your journey unearths more Pixls, whose abilities let you float, stomp, bomb or hammer your way around levels, helping you

> The game throws caution to the winds, with cubist enemies, monochrome dimensions with Spirograph stars, 8bit nostalgia and equations in the sky



It's a game with literal hidden depths, as digging down into the hub city of Flipside reveals a minigame palace (above), as well as side-quests like a Pokémon-inspired card capture system





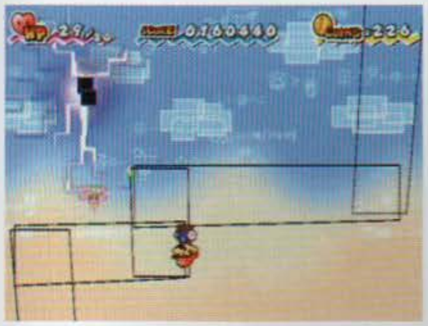


Playing as Bowser (above) is always a guilty pleasure, not least because of the power of his flame breath. The basic hidden minigames (left) are shorter on charm

Jump, man



For all its charms, there are a few elements of *Super Paper Mario* that are just plain bad. One is an unavoidable product of putting the game's paper cut-out, 2D-style characters in a 3D space. Side on, they show up as awkward black slivers, and the game offers no rationale for why 2D enemies are visible in 3D space, but not vice versa (most enemies only pose a threat in their original dimension, but it still causes confusion). Another problem is that although nearly all the platforming challenges take place in 2D, some are soluble – clumsily – in 3D. Which means that, even if the game never requires it, you may have to deal with the momentary horror of playing a bad Mario platform game.



It's been 20 years since game graphics used straight black lines with such abandon. These spare frames (above) transport Mario to areas that even his giant, star-powered 8bit self (right) couldn't reach. And the visual jokes don't end there, as the bedroom of uber-geek Francis shows (left)



Some of *Super Paper Mario*'s simplest visual ideas are its most successful. The Tile Pool (below), manages to make a tranquil watery paradise out of the plainest coloured blocks



solve puzzles and tackle enemies. It's a flexible system, if a rather cumbersome one, as you dip into the menu to swap characters and then back in to swap Pixls and then again to swap back. It's rare for these adjustments to work as more than lock-and-key puzzles, although combat offers a richer opportunity to improvise. Indeed, the final result is almost more reminiscent of a *Zelda* game than a Mario adventure

What is intact from previous versions is *Paper Mario*'s wit. It may have lost a little of its impact since the delight and amazement of *Superstar Saga*'s fluent iconoclasm, but it's still a treat to find such artful dialogue and shameless gag-making, translated as ever with exceptional flair. The story itself is a little flatter, starting to show the strain of how many times its been retold, even if it's done with a knowing wink and a cheesy smile. But, crucially, there's still no way of predicting where you're going to go next, who you're going to meet and what cheerful lunacy they're going to spout. It's what's always provided the sense of adventure in a game which is otherwise gentle and welcoming. Standing in front of the door to a newly opened world remains tangibly exciting.

Super Paper Mario wears its heritage on its sleeve: there's no mistaking the challenges it faced along the way in its development – the need to outdo a rich series of games which had already outdone decades of Mario evolution, the long gestation and the resulting over-abundance of ideas, the late switch from one console to another. But, while it's a heritage that's produced something that is a little rough around the edges, it's also produced something that's genuinely, wonderfully unique. Despite how familiar its elements are, there's never been a *Mario* game quite like *SPM*. Indeed, there's never been any game quite like it. Charming, irrepressible and inventive, the fact that it never manages to blend its ingredients smoothly together doesn't stop it being a toothsome pick 'n' mix of playful puzzles, familiar faces and unrestrained whimsy. **[7]**



Unlike the PSP version, there's no added multiplayer modes available here. It feels like padding in the Wii catalogue



Restart points can seem oddly spaced, and you'll often have to replay lengthy platforming and combat sequences after a single fatal mistake. Boss encounters can be particularly bad offenders in this respect





Swordfighting seems clumsily implemented when compared to the clear simplicity of that in *Twilight Princess*. Although it was never one of the series' strengths, at least the quick kills system offers a means of escape



PRINCE OF PERSIA: RIVAL SWORDS

FORMAT: WII PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW, PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Falling for you



Many platformers have used the trigger buttons to centre the camera behind the player. *Rival Swords* doesn't, but more often than not you'll still find yourself squeezing the Nunchuk's Z button out of instinct when you want to change the view. This will, in fact, drop you from any ledge you might be hanging from at the time, sometimes killing you. It's an indication of the control problems Ubisoft's designers faced on the Wii, and when coupled with the overly punitive fall damage, often serves to create a perfect storm of frustration.

Solid, if formulaic, *Prince Of Persia: The Two Thrones* retained the series' strengths as a platformer with unusual poise and elegance. Ported to the Wii as *Rival Swords*, and taken as an indicator of how Nintendo's machine is coping with its regular diet of refitted PS2 and PSP titles, however, the overall effect is slightly concerning.

And the main problems are right there in the player's hands. After spending three games refining its control scheme on standard joypads, the Prince's flips and wall runs have a bumpy landing on the Remote and Nunchuk. For the first few hours of *Rival Swords*, irritation rules: the controls seem needlessly complex, and the odd mix of gestural and more traditional button input makes for a schizophrenic experience that takes a surprising amount of time to get used to.

While it never fully clicks, it does eventually settle into a kind of familiarity. But that can't solve the game's newly found camera problems. Mapped to the D-pad, with horizontal control also available by twisting the Remote itself, the developers have done the best they can in the circumstances, but it's clear that the Wii is desperately lacking a second analogue stick, and the results remain counter-intuitive throughout the game.

Combat, too, is a chore. While stealth kills feel far more visceral with the Remote than they ever did as QTEs, elsewhere the series has traded button-mashing for a variety of swings and shakes that can quickly descend into arbitrary flailing around. Despite a lengthy move list, the best option is almost always to mindlessly rattle both controllers and hope the balletic violence that ensues doesn't send you prancing over the edge of a nearby cliff.

Rival Swords certainly isn't broken, and there's still a lot of fun to be had from scurrying across Babylon's rooftops and leaping from pillar to pillar. But the Wii offers little enticement for a fresh playthrough, and it's hard to ignore that the two years since the release of *Two Thrones* have not been particularly kind on it graphics-wise. There's also no avoiding the fact that the game is now fairly unwieldy, and that death is often a result of grappling with the inputs rather than the enemies or the environments. For a series that puts so much stock in grace and composure, the lack of an intuitive control scheme is hard to overcome. The Wii is tailor-made for Nintendo's new vocabulary of pokes, swings and spins: a natural eccentric, it's at times like this, when it tries to act in a normal fashion, that it starts to look rather odd and out of place. **[4]**



Wall-running is as pleasing as it ever was, and button and gestural input respond well to context. Beneath the controls, the game remains well-crafted and often clever



In keeping with the usual escalation of silliness in sports updates, the captains' abilities are even more exaggerated – Mario becomes a player-squashing Super Mario, Peach freezes opponents with a camera flash, Kong sends them flying with a ground pound – but all serve to clear space for a Mega Strike







MARIO STRIKERS: CHARGED FOOTBALL

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: MAY 25
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: NEXT LEVEL GAMES

Our European enthusiasm for football makes *Mario Strikers: Charged Football* a much more significant release than it might otherwise have been. For starters, it's that rarity from Nintendo, a European debut, with NTSC release dates still unconfirmed. And there's an even bigger knock-on effect: with *Pokémon Battle Revolution* still unreleased outside Japan, this powered-up cartoon four-a-side soccer game becomes the first online Wii game in the western world.

But for all this unexpected Euro-centrism, *Mario Strikers* (developed in Canada by Next Level, as was its GameCube predecessor, known in Europe as *Mario Smash Football*) remains a defiant North Americanisation of the sport: an aggressive, crunchy grudge match, all crash pads, exaggerated special moves and double-figure score-lines. This version goes to even further extremes by introducing the Mega Strike.

Team captains – Mario, Luigi, Bowser, Peach, Donkey Kong and co – can now launch a volley of up to six balls in a single aerial strike by holding down the B button for several seconds. This triggers a minigame interlude: first the striker selects the number of balls and shot strength on a meter; then the receiver takes the part of the goalie, with a chance to block some or all of the balls in a firstperson reaction test, pointing the Remote at the screen to direct his hands.

On the plus side, the Mega Strike does introduce a greater element of risk for the striker, and a shot at survival for the receiver, compared to the seemingly inevitable success of the one-shot Super Strike in the GameCube original. It also brings amazing last-gasp recoveries within reach. But it's so powerful, and has such a dramatic effect on the score, that it comes to completely dominate the game as well as breaking its fast-flowing rhythm. There are plenty of other useful and entertaining tactics – ball-charging to increase accuracy, for example – built into the game, but the Mega Strike renders most of them pointless, and puts too great an emphasis on the team captain character. This would be less of a problem if the automatic player selection and AI formations weren't so disastrously unpredictable, a shame in an otherwise polished and punchy knockabout.

Mario Strikers is a more balanced game in multiplayer, it's true, especially with the very welcome option to have two players per side, both online and offline. It wasn't possible to test the online mode before going to press, but use of the Friend Code system, region-locked random matches and a global ranking system have been confirmed, and there's little reason not to expect a robust service.

The eventful, minutes-long matches and frantic to-and-fro make *Mario Strikers* a suitable curtain-raiser for online gaming on the Wii, but a balanced and deep extreme sports game this is not, lacking the fine checks and balances of, say, EA's *NBA Street*. It's a decent investment for multiplayer enthusiasts, but as Nintendo's hesitant toe-dipping in the online ocean goes, *Mario Kart DS* was a far more auspicious start. **[6]**





As well as tackling with the D-pad, you can hit players with a shake of the Remote, the joke being you can actually hit the player next to you on the sofa. A nice idea, but as with goal-saving it's another forced application of motion-sensing, and not responsive enough



Strike one



Although it's a much less appealing prospect in singleplayer, *Mario Strikers: Charged Football* does offer a reasonable amount of interest across two modes – the Road to the Striker Cup tournament career, and an engaging but too-small collection of character-specific challenges. The former features fairly extensive round-robin tournaments topped by knockout stages – still quickly despatched, considering the brisk matches, while that latter presents a variety of scenarios (first to score, come from behind to win, or win by a certain goal difference, sometimes with a man down or a dizzy goalkeeper) that also serve as introductions to the various captains, useful since you can't change teams in the cup campaign. There's also a good training suite, but the versus mode would have benefited from the ability to set up multiplayer tournaments.

The captains' sidekicks – Toads, Shy Guys, Koopas and Boos to name but a few – all possess elaborate and funny single strikes to match the captains' Mega Strikes, as well as useful feints. They are well-balanced, but inevitably overshadowed







BOOM BOOM ROCKET

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: 800 MS POINTS (£6.67) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA POGO DEVELOPER: BIZARRE CREATIONS

Viz à visualise



Those looking for an alternative source of musical psychedelia to Jeff Minter's Neon will be pleased to discover that *Boom Boom Rocket* includes an excellent visualiser. The options are slender, but considering the simplicity of what it's working with – rotating explosions in different colours – its timing and overall dynamic response are superb, and it's colourful without being brash. It's balanced by the pointless Freestyle mode, which not only doesn't let use your own music, but enforces the original rocket patterns, only giving you freedom to detonate at will. A hybrid of these two would have been a truly excellent visual toy.

There was a fizz and crackle of excitement around *Boom Boom Rocket*'s fireworks some time before they were let off. Here, at last, was a brand new Live Arcade game, not a port, with a pedigree that wasn't two decades old; here was Bizarre Creations' follow-up to the download service's scintillating opening starburst, *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*. Expectation quickly swelled that we would see the first second-generation Live Arcade title or, at the very least, an all-new scoreboard sensation to finally match early releases like *Mutant Storm*, *Hexic* and *Marble Blast*. Live Arcade, whilst hardly moribund, has been an enclave of retro reworkings of late, and strong original games with universal appeal have been in all-too-short supply.

Boom Boom Rocket does at least step into one of the less-exploited genres on Arcade – rhythm action. A simple *DDR* variant, it asks you to press face buttons in time with music, to detonate colour-coded rockets when they reach a line at the top of the screen. Good performance charges a bonus bar up to a 4x multiplier, at which point a temporary 16x bonus run becomes available, which, like *Guitar Hero*'s star power, will need to be carefully timed to maximise score.



***Rocket* can be played with just the face buttons and thus one handed, although a two-handed approach (doubling up on the D-pad) might be advised in higher difficulty levels. Both of the 360 pad's digital input options are a little too vague, though**

It's an extraordinarily simple game, the only twist in its tail being the cunning exploitation of changing rocket speeds and parabolas to fool the eye. A nice touch, but it can't make up for the lack of truly interesting patterns or, worse, Ian Livingstone's awful music. Hollow, synthesised classical-trance 'remixes' may very well be par for the course at fireworks displays, but they have none of the catchiness or the rhythmic snap and bounce good rhythm action games need, and most batter the life out of their timeless original melodies.

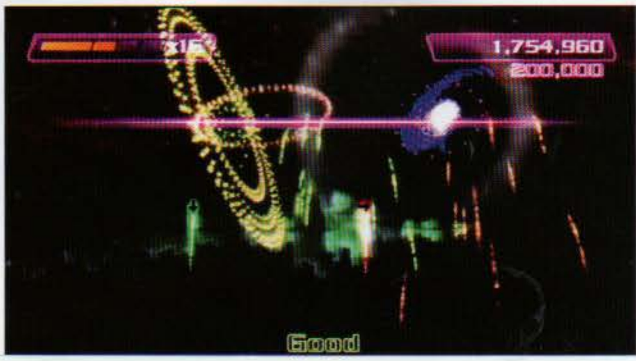
Of all genres of game, rhythm action is the one you would expect to design itself, but a by-the-numbers example like *Boom Boom Rocket* proves that it is nuances of scoring, pattern and structural design – all of which are metronomically basic, or in the case of structure, entirely absent here – that set the good ones apart. Those and a good tune, obviously. *Boom Boom Rocket* gets plenty right: the three difficulty levels are perfectly pitched, scoreboard support is good, the inclusion of splitscreen multiplayer, endurance mode and a visualiser make it decent value, the sound effects are great and there's just enough visual gratification. But *Boom Boom Rocket* is marking time rather than feeling the rhythm, and that's not enough to set Live Arcade's skies alight. **[5]**



Ironically, *Geometry Wars* was by far the better firework display. That's partly because *Rocket* saves itself for the Bonus Run that smears light and colour across the screen



Endurance mode loops a song, speeding up as it goes. It effectively shows that *Geometry Wars*' 'endless' design doesn't work in rhythm action and robs the song of its structure, which is what motivates the player in the first place







MARIO VS DONKEY KONG 2: MARCH OF THE MINIS

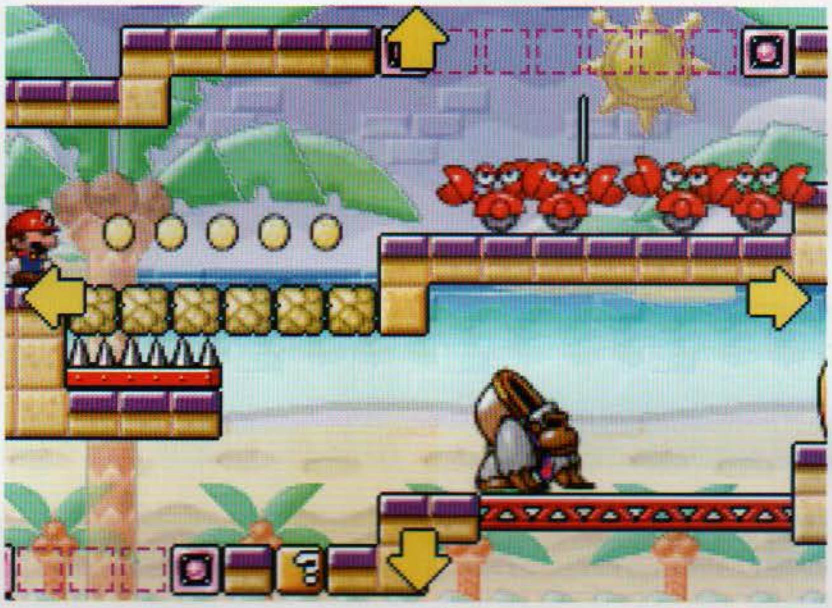
FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Loading up this sequel to the GBA's elegant original, you're braced for a little brand fatigue. And you're not disappointed: surprise is, the brand in question isn't *Mario*, it's *Lemmings*.

Although the two games share the same goal – guide a troop of tiny toy Marios to the exit – they take a very different approach. Whereas the GBA version gave you control of Mario, and let him lead his effigies out, the DS version gives you control of a stylus, and lets you poke and stroke the toys into action directly. A sweep to the left or right will start them walking in that direction, a flick up will see them jump, a sharp tap brings them to a halt. Your task is to smooth their way – guiding them away from enemies, into lifts, over spikes, through coins and finally to safety. But once you've started one up, it won't stop until you stop it, marching blithely into the jaws of death or off the tops of cliffs. So the challenge is one of rationing your greed. Will you play it safe – minimising your score – by chaperoning each mini-Mario to the door in turn, via the safest, shortest route? Or will you let each level's intricate clockwork play out, and set your charges off on their journeys all at once, skipping from one to another and timing their exits to maximise your bonus multiplier?

It's that lemming-like determination that gives the game its tactical edge and its potential for agonised frustration. Not least because it's contagious: lose track of one mini-Mario, and he may wander into another you had previously safely stopped. The collision will start them both moving in tandem, and whatever hazard you were trying to protect the solo Mario from will quickly claim the pair. As levels become more intricate – colour coded switch puzzles, variable water levels, sticky walls and ceilings the Marios can climb – the potential for catastrophe becomes all the more real. But every level has a perfect solution lurking within in, and the task of first uncovering that sequence, and then of successfully implementing it, is continually alluring. Not, of course, that there's any need: all that's required to finish a level is to march one Mario home – no matter if the rest are squashed, shattered or drowned. But the fewer you rescue, the fewer will be at your disposal for the boss battles at the end of each stage. These repetitive and tiresome minigame-style encounters are the weak link in an otherwise extremely accomplished game: smartly thought out, handsomely presented and perfectly showcasing the combination of quick thinking and quick reactions we so often claim videogames encourage. **[7]**





The Bowser-beating minigame (above) which waits at the end of each world is the only bit of the game that feels like a bolted-on DS extra. The game's main levels (left) do little to betray their GBA heritage, in looks or controls



Managing switchable water levels calls for a clear head and a fair bit of trial and error. Although pipes behave as you'd expect in a *Mario* game, it can be frustrating when one leads to an unexpected off-screen exit, causing a few frantic seconds' scrolling as you search for your charge



The opening FMV gives the traditional Mario storyline a sly little twist. At the debut of their new toy lines, Donkey Kong takes rather a shine to the buxom brunette opening the festivities. When she falls for Mario instead, he retaliates by kidnapping her. Well, what else could he do?

Block building

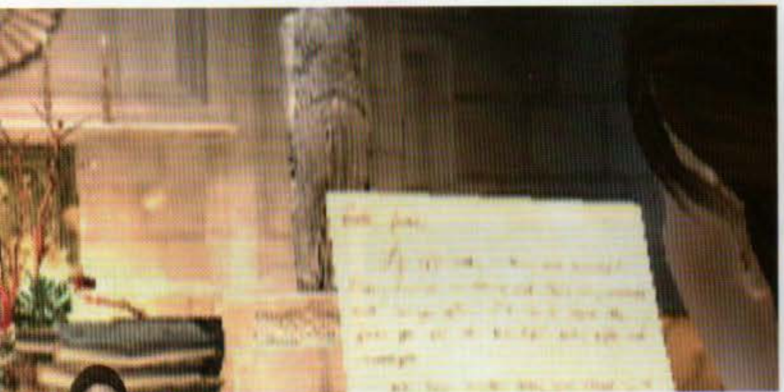


There's no disguising *March Of The Minis*' class, from the crisp practicality of its menus to the generous way each level's clock doesn't start ticking when you start looking around, only when you start *playing* around. Indeed, it's exactly what you've come to expect from Nintendo's own software. But an adaptable and well-presented level editor – especially one where the results can be shared over wifi – is the kind of bonus you've come to expect to be absent from Nintendo's games. But here it is, offering as ever the harshest of game design masterclasses, as your own efforts prove again and again to be ham-fisted and fragile where those that ship with the game are as robust as they are elegant.



Alongside *Tomb Raider's* many charms, *Anniversary* has some of its flaws – swimming is as sluggish and frustrating here as it was in the original. At least the water effects are better



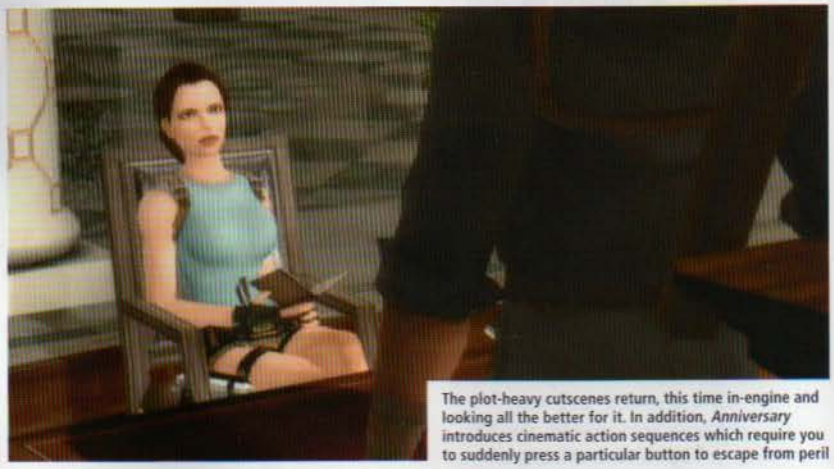


The original PlayStation *Tomb Raider* was unable to render Lara's ponytail in-game. One advantage of having in-engine cutscenes is that, in a move reminiscent of *Dead Or Alive's* breast physics, Lara's hair swishes consistently throughout



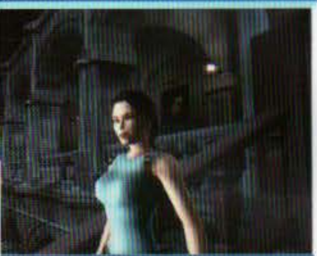
TOMB RAIDER: ANNIVERSARY

FORMAT: PC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED) PSP PRICE: £30
RELEASE: MAY 25 PUBLISHER: EIDOS
DEVELOPER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS



The plot-heavy cutscenes return, this time in-engine and looking all the better for it. In addition, *Anniversary* introduces cinematic action sequences which require you to suddenly press a particular button to escape from peril

Bad manors



As with *Legend*, the Crofts' stately home is available as a combined tutorial and bonus level. Cleverly, areas of the building that appear in *Legend* are still under construction in *Anniversary's* version – but the scaffolding and packing boxes make for as good an assault course to hone your skills. Unfortunately the unfinished nature of the house is mirrored by a large number of glitches and bugs – Lara will clip through walls and encounter invisible blockades – often frustrating your attempts to solve an already cruelly difficult puzzle.

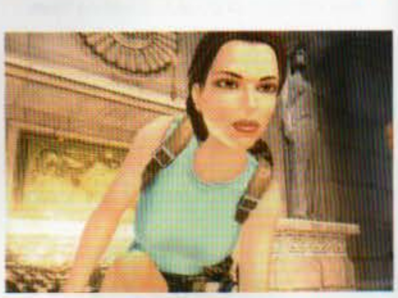
Ten years pass; everyone gets a lot older and a little wiser. Except Lara Croft who, very wisely, hasn't aged at all. Paying heed to the criticisms that have dogged the franchise over the intervening years, Eidos has tried to recapture those halcyon days before *Tomb Raider* became distracted by motorcycle chase sequences, before the focus of the series was diluted by a larger arsenal and legions of armed foes, and before it drifted away from the cool, methodical thrill of exploration.

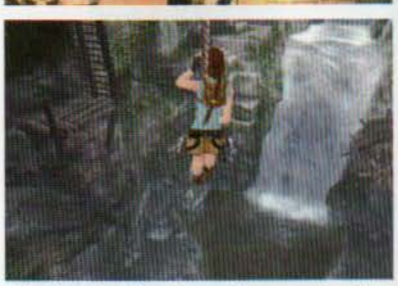
Taking the engine used for *Tomb Raider Legend*, Eidos has revisited Lara's very first outing, remodelling the environments and bringing the graphics up to a standard comparable with its closest PS2 competitor, *Prince Of Persia*. The effort is commendable even for last-generation technology; the chunky cuboid-heavy world that we found so evocative in 1996 has been transformed, returning to it a sense of gloomy grandeur as you scale and penetrate the ancient halls of dead civilisations.

However, it's immediately apparent that beneath the graphical enhancements the original game remains to a large extent unaltered and surprisingly, despite ten years of increasing expectations, its charms are intact. Perhaps we haven't come as far as we like to think. The story, just as it was in the original, is certainly no less sophisticated than the pituitary nonsense of *Gears Of War*. Equally, in terms of the actual mechanics of play, *Legend's* emphasis on physics-based puzzles has been eschewed to no ill-effect in favour of the platform challenges of the original. *Anniversary* relaxes into a more pensive pace than recent *Tomb Raider* games – to describe it as quaint would sound derogatory, but the sense of taking on the environment, alone but unintimidated, is something rare amongst today's adrenaline-addicted big-budget releases.

Lara's repertoire of moves is a little expanded over the original, and the challenges are suitably tweaked to incorporate them. A grappling hook is one such addition, but unlike the others its integration feels unnatural and faulted. It's not the only fly in the ointment – the enemy AI is as basic as it has ever been, and while there is a certain nostalgic delight in the fact that they are little more than mobile hazards, standing on a small ledge just out of reach and shooting them for minutes on end never becomes especially satisfying.

It is, however, in keeping with Eidos' remit to loyally recreate the original experience – a mission statement announced in the decision to return Lara to the costume and proportions that first made her an icon. Perhaps this is where it all went wrong – a preoccupation with fleshing out Lara Croft that failed to recognise that it was what Lara did, rather than who she was, that made the game special. *Anniversary* may not raise the bar, as *Tomb Raider* did upon its release, but it does make good on the mistakes of previous titles and revisits the original game in a way that recaptures much of what established it as a gaming milestone. **[7]**





Although Lara's attire and proportions regress from the more credible form they took in *Legend*, her facial animations maintain the sophistication of the later game





Like his forefathers, hero Johnny must rely on the Native Americans if he's to survive. Shania is a tomahawk-toting princess, while companion Natan prefers pistols. Shania can channel tribal spirits and sprout wings or claws



SHADOW HEARTS: FROM THE NEW WORLD

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £30 RELEASE: MAY 11
PUBLISHER: GHOSTLIGHT DEVELOPER: NAUTILUS

After two critically encouraging, yet commercially stagnant games set in the dark gothic locale of early 20th century Europe, *Shadow Hearts* developers Nautilus must have been desperate for a hit. So for this, the third (and probably final) game in the series, it's out with the old and in with the *New World*. Like the Pilgrims before them, they've decided to begin afresh, and so this episode cuts almost all ties to the characters from its prequels. The dark edge is gone, and the oddball humour has been brought to the fore. The desperation for success is palpable, and other RPGs have been ruthlessly strip-mined – the lead character Johnny, a 16-year-old all-American has more than a touch of the Tidus about him, the Stellar Charts nodal upgrade system resembles *Final Fantasy X*'s Sphere Grid, and high/medium/low attack zones have been borrowed from *Xenosaga II* (although they're better implemented here). Indeed, apart from the Judgement Ring (the reaction-based battle dial that's a hallmark of the series) there really is very little on the surface to distinguish this resolutely old school (and just plain old – it was first released in 2005 in Japan) RPG from other, more ambitious titles.

That said, *New World* is a difficult game to dislike. Everything about it screams affability – rarely difficult, easy to play, largely grind-free, and packed with off the wall humour. While it has an undeniably cheap feel to it (locations are small and often repetitive, CG is used sparingly, monsters lack imagination, and at 25-30 hours it's surprisingly short), there's an abundance of charm as it spins its bizarre tale of flame-throwing Mariachis, bisexual bikers, UFOs and a ninja called Frank. A real-world (albeit alternate-history) 1920s setting certainly makes a nice change from the usual sci-fi or fantasy trappings, and despite its gleeful anachronisms (one belt is described as having a British punk rock look in the game) it manages to capture the atmospherics of locations such as New York, the Caribbean and Roswell, New Mexico.

It's almost pathologically unpretentious in its lo-fi good cheer, and the game's humour and brevity mean that almost anyone will be able to make it to the end. Admittedly, this may not be enough for RPG fans spoilt in recent times by Square-Enix mega-blockbusters such as *Dragon Quest VIII* and *Final Fantasy XII*; by comparison *New World* seems like the videogame equivalent of a direct to DVD effort. But sometimes it's worth giving thanks for the smaller games in life – *From The New World* is certainly no turkey, and you'd need to have a cold heart indeed not to enjoy a game where you get to see a giant cat using Drunken Master kung fu to break Al Capone out of Alcatraz. **[6]**



Mechanics wise, things are much the same as in *Covenant* – in battle, your moves have to be activated by stopping a meter as it passes over the Judgement Ring dial. The closer you get to the red, the more powerful your attack



The flexible combo system enables you to create and execute devastating attack plans. It works well, although the endless amount of customisation options for your ring, magic and abilities can become a little wearying



Losing your mind is a constant problem. After each battle round, your sanity (SP) count drops by one. Once at zero, your character goes beserk and becomes uncontrollable

Cat Coin Cinema and Big Foot Bullets



Every character in *New World* has their own side-quest which will level up their abilities – hero Johnny has to take photos of bosses, shaman Shania has to collect statues, and Mao the gangster cat has to collect Cat Coins (in order to fund his movies at Purramount Pictures). Best of all, Native American Natan upgrades his Gun-Fu by trapping mythical beasts in urns. Once he's found a spot where he thinks a beast might be hiding (illustrated by a meat icon), he must lay down the appropriate bait to attract his monster. Once the monster arrives (like the invisible sasquatch that isn't pictured above) it must be defeated in battle and stored in an urn. Only then can it be taken to spirit leader Nvwoti's tepee to exchange it for an upgrade.



HONEYCOMB BEAT

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $20 (£10) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: HUDSON

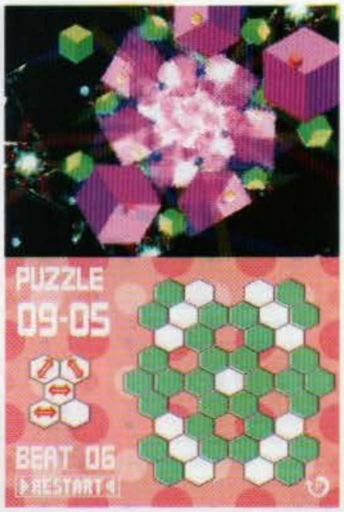
There's a point that comes in DS ownership, a point after which you'll never feel quite the same about the machine again. For some it came with *One Line Puzzle*, for others with *Brain Training*'s memory tests, and for some it may come with this: it's a game that teaches you what the end of your stylus tastes like.

Honeycomb Beat is an age-old puzzle proposition. Tapping a hexagon causes it, and the circle of tiles that surround it, to flip, changing colour. The goal, as ever in the homogenous world of videogames, is to get the colour to match. The devil is in the chain reactions that the interlocking circles of tiles produce – it's all too easy to end up chasing one rogue tile all round the board, ruining your hard-won progress as you go.

The game comprises a Puzzle mode, which faces you off against dozens of prepared conundrums, each with a limited number of moves available, and a Survival mode. This is more *Tetris*-inspired, asking that you clear the filling screen line by line. Jumping into the latter without spending time in the former is likely to result in almost instant defeat.

Although this may look to share a great deal in common with countless other colour-match puzzlers, your four-sided instincts count for little in this six-sided world. But spend too much time in Puzzle mode and you're likely to emerge with a headache, as well as the nasty tang of chewed stylus in your mouth. The harder puzzles are fiendish, looking straightforwardly impossible at first, second and often tenth glance, only yielding to painfully careful thought or exhaustive trial and error. The introduction of special tiles, which automatically change colour after a certain number of taps, or modifiers, which make the flip chain reaction spread out in straight lines rather than circles, only ups the strain. But once your brain starts seeing the patterns that Puzzle mode teaches, progressing beyond an inadvertent line or two in Survival mode becomes an attainable goal.

Sadly, Hudson's efforts to liven up what's an inevitably sterile-looking game have failed badly. The top-screen visualiser is simply ugly and the tweaks to background and tile-colour are a nice touch but don't add any charisma. *Honeycomb Beat* remains a proposition that's satisfying but flavourless – something you may find yourself thinking about your stylus. **[5]**



The dozens of pre-prepared puzzles can be fiendish enough in themselves, but the option of dragging modifier icons on to tiles, changing the pattern with which they flip, enables high scores just as surely as it does enormous headaches





It's a long way from being a pretty game, but a range of backdrops and a choice of tile colours and top-screen visualiser at least offer some variety of ugliness. Your early efforts are likely to be rewarded with a brain rating of a fly – a rather cruel take on Professor Kawashima's comparisons



FINAL FANTASY FABLES: CHOCOBO TALES

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $30 (£15) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US) MAY 25 (UK) PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: HAND



Developer Hand sometimes goes for melodrama, inducing just slightly fewer cringes than the gags. There's none of Nintendo's in-joke deftness here

Chocobos have always seemed somewhat unnecessary: flightless birds bred mostly for transportation in a world that has widespread access to airships. Games where chocobos occupy the lead role tend to be similarly unneeded – additions to genres done to death and back, reeled out for quick cashflow in Square's quiet periods.

Chocobo Tales makes a more substantial effort. The look – a combination of *Final Fantasy III*'s cheery polygons and crayoned-in pop-up book sprites – appeals instantly, as does the musical score: a medley of tunes from familiar series entries, rejiggered and resynthesised for maximum tweeness. It's all a nice address towards one's inner child, at least until the minigames start.

Taking their names from fairy tales (The Boy Who Cried Leviathan, Mini Red Riding Hood), these minigames are built around the inane tasks that characterise the lower tiers of DS development. Too often, the minigames in *Chocobo Tales* are nothing more than crippled forms of better games. Titan and the Beanstalk is *Kirby: Power Paintbrush*, minus the speed, the precision, and the fun. The Three Little Pigs is *Pac-Man* without walls: a textbook premise for an unpleasant time.



The pretty basic minigames (above) are bland, and the worst, such as Pot Luck, are based on blind, dumb chance. So are the best, sadly. They're fun with four people, but what isn't?

It's a shame, because the Card Battle subgame, while simple, is actually quite a bit of fun. Cards, collected around the map, are used to send Pokémon-esque monsters into battle. It's sadly under-utilised, coming up only rarely, and only after marathon minigame tedium. The story, while botching all attempts at humour ("pretty fly for a white mage," anyone?), is cute and mostly unpretentious. The multiplayer, which is great fun in Card Battle mode, is enough to make a few of the minigames worth playing.

Minigame collections make great staging grounds. At their peak, games such as *WarioWare* and *Rhythm Tengoku* shoot off new game mechanics like model rockets, watching carefully what works and what falls back to Earth. Each attempt is a reach outwards towards something unexplored. The minigames here have none of that drive, though. They're content to lie around and bury the finer elements until the game feels as inessential as its lead. **[4]**



COOKING MAMA: COOK OFF

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: $50 (£25) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), MAY 11 (UK) PUBLISHER: 505 GAME STREET DEVELOPER: OFFICE CREATE

Some will find the very idea of *Cooking Mama: Cook Off* distasteful, offering as it does more minigames, more of Wii at its most basic, and more distance between Nintendo's new audience and its old one. Though Friends And Food Of The World, a new time challenge event with a multinational cast of competing chefs, adds some spice to the original DS version, it's still a stunningly straightforward game which would happily sit next to *Wii Sports* or *Play* as a primer for gestural control.

With each of the 55 dishes broken into obvious preparation and cooking stages, there's little sense of contrivance in the minigames themselves. Depending on the recipe you might have to pour, chop, crack open or peel the ingredients before working a pot, pan, whisk, oven or microwave. None of which is particularly complicated – the simpler tasks are performed entirely as you'd expect, the more multifaceted requiring you to perhaps turn a heat dial up and down on demand, add ingredients by clicking icons or arrange the ingredients so they don't spoil.



From the humble to the demanding, *Cook Off* brings together a world of dishes. The techniques are often the same, but every so often you'll stuff a sausage, grind some meat or pound some rice

Each stage is scored and graded for speed and 'accuracy' before the very Engrish Mama delivers her final verdict.

Cook Off's bold colours and heavy lines mean that it looks cheery no matter how its viewed, whether via component 480p or composite smelly-vision; the game has an effortless charm, though that isn't necessarily a good thing. The supreme idiocy of Mama's kitchen, for example, wherein valuable time can be spent cranking out fake foods with Wii's petite plastic cosh, makes this a tempting prospect for both the very young and for lovers of the Japanese eccentric. But *Cook Off* lacks the wit to keep either audience entertained.

Too many of its dishes are mere remixes of the same simple techniques. Too many of its taut time trials founder because of some quirk of the Remote. And too much of its feedback comprises scores and grades where pictures – a massacred moussaka, perhaps, or crappy croquette – would at least have raised a chuckle. **[5]**





Twoplayer games sound great but often collapse due to a single mishap. Stirring's a particularly unreliable endeavour, a tiny tip of the hand bringing it to a halt



SUPERBIKE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP: SBK-07

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: MAY 18 PUBLISHER: BLACK BEAN GAMES DEVELOPER: MILESTONE









SBK-07 sometimes can't decide between the trackside dollybirds and the licensed riders – the main menu opts for a 50/50 split. And although the riders are fairly detailed, surroundings veer from an accurate Brands Hatch (left) to bland fog.

In the real world, the Superbike series is the slightly less glamorous cousin of MotoGP: and now, in the virtual world, the *Superbike* series looks to be the slightly less glamorous cousin of *MotoGP*. The comparison of a new kid on the block to such an established old boy might seem unfair, but *SBK-07* is obviously unafraid of a head-on collision – lifting everything from the twin-stick control method to the appearance of cornering arrows from its venerable competitor.

Unfortunately, it often shows itself up in the comparison. The career mode demands that you approach each track as a professional, meaning four practise sessions plus a 'superpole' position decider before the warm up even begins. *MotoGP* at least offset this with the relative anarchy of Extreme mode's street racing, so in contrast *SBK-07*'s alternative of a simple quick race seems a little inadequate. It makes the centre of the game tiring, to say the least, and the repetition over the relatively few tracks will surely dismay many possible fans. Which makes it the greater pity that *SBK-07* isn't all that bad once you're actually racing: the twin-stick handling lends a degree of finesse to your constant braking and accelerating around the licensed tracks, while the higher levels of AI provide a speedy challenge (despite sticking like glue to their racing lines regardless of your position). And being a licensed game, it may make the difference for fans to know that all of Superbike's riders, motorcycles and sponsors feature as well as unlockable umbrella girls and extra tracks.

The fact that Milestone has a five-year licence for the Superbike series (and 360 and PC versions will follow later this year) encourages hope that this unspectacular but sound foundation will lead to a more substantial future effort. At the moment the experience certainly isn't awful, but nor is it in any way exceptional – and up against the accomplished competition, that simply won't be good enough. **[6]**



Needless to say, the bikes can look stunning from the appropriately dramatic replay angles, which allow you to relive inspired manoeuvres. The only minor flaws are the tyres which, compared to the chassis and driver, are bland and underwhelming



TIME EXTEND

NIGHTS INTO DREAMS

FORMAT: **SATURN**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (SONIC TEAM)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **1996**



This beloved mascot for a dead console mixed the world of dreams with the single-minded expression of an idea

Whether to open a menu or equip an item, to survey surroundings or simply change the way your character is facing, most videogames require you to stop moving at some point or other. Though the choice of stopping and starting can be a hallmark of the freedoms a videogame lends its players, it's often also the case that momentum is more associated with danger than it is pure, exhilarating carefree movement.

Though *Sonic The Hedgehog* made speed its signature, it was still a platformer: raised ground still got in the way and traps ensured caution came before racing ahead. Springs might have bounced Sonic freely into the air, but he'd always come back down to Earth's traction and gravity.

In fact, the defining spirit of the *Sonic* experience burned more strongly on the Saturn than it did on the Mega Drive. On this loved but cowed console, Sonic Team would graduate the principle of unfettered speed to literal interpretation with the closest thing the Saturn ever had to a flagship title: *Nights Into Dreams*. Because once propelled unobstructed into the sky, *Nights* simply kept flying.

Nights was launched into a wave of hype, and though it confused those who were all too ready to stick it with the platforming label and disappointed those that wanted it to be *Mario 64*, it delivered on what it promised. An execution of an idea rather than a direct descendent – or precursor – to a genre, *Nights* was anomalous at a time when old ideas were being applied to the boundless promises that three-dimensional space appeared to offer. It was also free from the restraints of the established rule-sets that had shackled Sonic since birth.



SONG OF THE GAMIPIAN

As alive as everything else in its world, the soundtrack in *Nights* thrives on an amount of player input. The result of early experiments in dynamic game environments, the music that loops throughout each stage is influenced by the apparent mood of the various creatures (known as Pians) that populate them. Governed by an early form of the A-Life system found in *Sonic Adventure*, the Pians' mood causes the music to be chipper and upbeat if they're safe and happy, and the opposite if they're in frequent danger.





The game's 2.5D flightpaths in the place of unlimited freedom were perhaps perceived as backwards when it was first released, even if they actually offered fantastically expressive movement. In flight, its titular character has the full height of each 3D space to enact its range of acrobatic manoeuvres. Speeding and looping from hoop to item to item around each course is an exercise in flow, of unbroken momentum instead of staccato pedestrian wandering.

The seven stages work in loops – if you can perform well enough to find the time for another go around. Beginning and end become one and the same, an elegant enforcement of the thrill of flying forever forwards. The smooth controls and seamlessly responsive animation was a big part of producing this sensation; indeed, the game came packaged with an analogue controller, a forerunner of the Dreamcast pad. The removal of sterile digital precision is indispensable to the experience, allowing you to achieve the simple thrill of pulling off a fancy move without conscious thought, as if writing your name in the air with a sparkler on Bonfire Night.

The tired concepts of lives and health bars are absent in *Nights*. Instead of mortal threat there's instead one primary foe: time. Colliding with an enemy reduces your flight time, but *Nights* is never a race. To treat it as such would be to miss the point entirely, because races are about shortening an experience. In *Nights*, the challenge doesn't lie in beating the clock – it lies in teasing it, in squeezing out every last second of flight you can get away with.

Because, with *Nights*, playtime is its own reward – and though high scores are the ultimate goal, the joy in playing and scoring highly are the same act. Flightpaths are cut with intricate patterns of items that beg to be linked together – collected in quick succession – for bonuses. For those willing to find the optimal paths some stages can be continuously linked in a flow broken only by the clock and an inevitable need to move on.

At this point, the Nights character and its child companion link arms, swing, and boost away with their combined momentum towards a new path while your only impulse is to maintain their perfect, unbroken aerial ballet. With cognitive play eventually giving way to muscular memory, playing *Nights* becomes almost akin to learning a musical instrument on an instinctive level.



Beginning each level on foot, finding Nights lets you soar into an almost-3D dreamscape, with paralooping, triple jumps, dashing and various stunts keeping a route going through the precious rings. Power-ups were available, but next to the fluid joy of the central mechanics seemed almost unnecessary

That *Nights* generates such desire is a mark of the success of creators Yuji Naka, Naoto Oshima and Takashi Iizuka, who intended it to express the sensation of flight in dreams. It captures the feel of those joy dreams that are common to every human being – both the exhilaration and the anxiety that you might lose it.

With Nights, playtime is its own reward – and though high scores are the ultimate goal, the joy in playing and scoring highly are the same act

Nights takes place in the dreamscapes of two children, Claris and Elliot, featuring theatrically surreal visual design: skies with roofs, floating trees and softly deforming terrain. In a storyline about them confronting their fears of performing – Claris is a singer and Elliot a basketball player – the children tackle three stages each on their own, before joining for the last.

The development from your early inexperienced fumblings of playing to



One of the Nightmares – bosses that demand lateral thinking rather than pounding a weakspot. This is Puffy, a female rabbit-balloon that Nights throws through walls before capturing in a mousetrap





eventual unconscious mastery of the controls is also mirrored by the finale, which is set on a flat disk with a miniaturised version of their home town on it, set in a void. There's apparently nowhere to go: to achieve flight in all the preceding stages, the children must locate, on foot, Nights – an asexual court jester-like character with whom they can merge. As if an expression of the game withdrawing its hand, Nights isn't to be found, so you realise that must take a leap of faith by throwing the children into the void. They fall out of sight before, in a moment of affirmation, the theme tune kicks in and they soar into the sky. Though *Nights* is as guilty as many of its contemporaries for taking on storytelling through the novelties of pre-rendered animations on its CD-ROM, this moment is a defining landmark of synergy between gameplay and narrative.

It is perhaps appropriate, if unusual, that a title that refused to imitate hasn't been imitated itself. Perhaps *Nights* is so unique that any attempt would be such obvious and shameful plagiarising that it would never be accepted. However, a version has been created for Sega's *EyeToy Superstars* in a minigame that asks players to glide by holding their arms up and down to ascend and descend, tilting them to turn.

With the announcement of a new stand-alone successor for the Wii, it's interesting to note how closely *Nights* seems tied to its controls. Perhaps this is a reason why it hasn't been milked as a franchise – no control method until the Wii Remote has offered its creators any meaningful advance from the original controller's fluid responsiveness.

Regardless, the effect is that *Nights* stands out most for being that rare thing: a game for which no fully appropriate comparison exists. Though the weight of expectation must be stifling, this means its sequel need develop on nothing but itself. It only needs to focus on that one idea of unfettered motion, and perhaps we'll be flying again.



RED JACKET SYNDROME

As a 1996 Christmas present distributed on magazine covers, *Nights* was released as a substantial demo called *Christmas Nights*. It takes the Spring Valley stage from the original game, adds a new course, and covers it all in snow and a number of unlockables, some of which are dependent on your Saturn's internal clock. It also includes a Link Attack mode in which it is theoretically possible to keep a link in the Frozen Bell stage alive forever so long as your thumbs don't fall off. This was perhaps the most pure release for the obsessive perfectionist the game could offer.









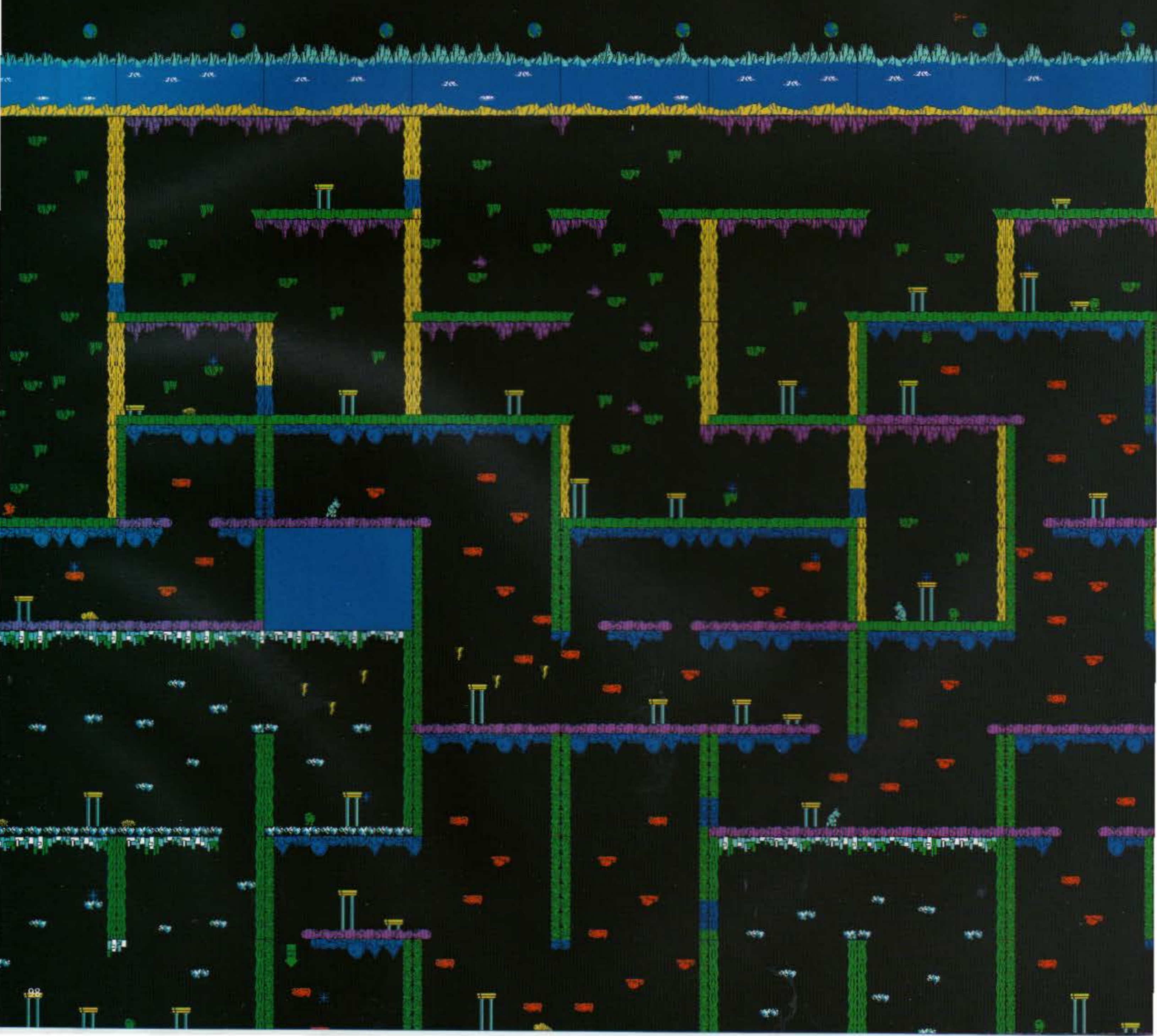


The Saturn was a machine suited to 2D excellence rather than 3D in any sense, but *Nights* made full use of the scrolling effects and draw distance on offer to create a compellingly beautiful illusion of depth

THE MAKING OF...
NODES OF YESOD

It's no surprise to discover that one of the oddest games of the '80s was created by teenagers with a penchant for sleeping under their desks

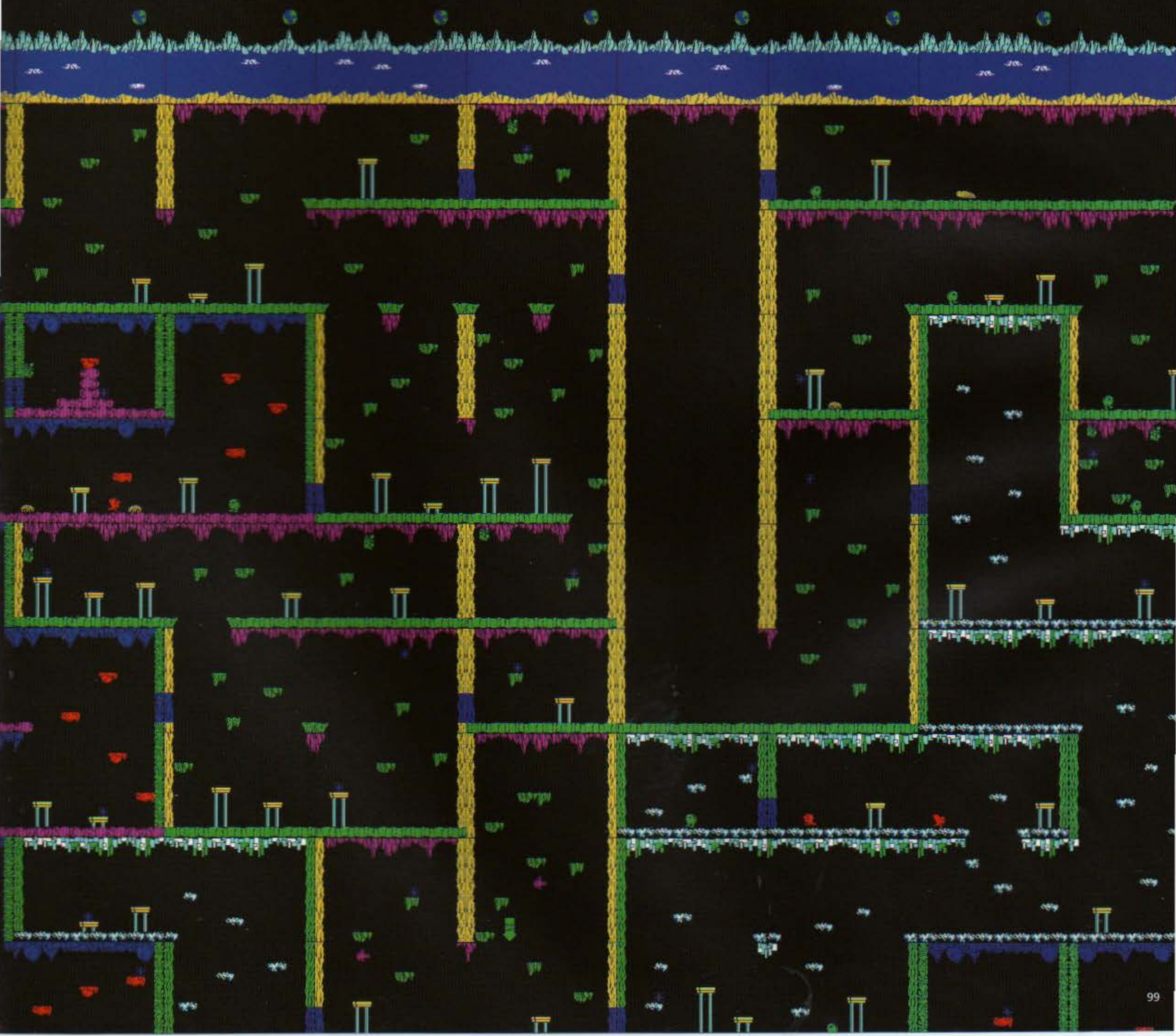
FORMAT: **SPECTRUM/C64** PUBLISHER: **ODIN COMPUTER GRAPHICS** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **1985**

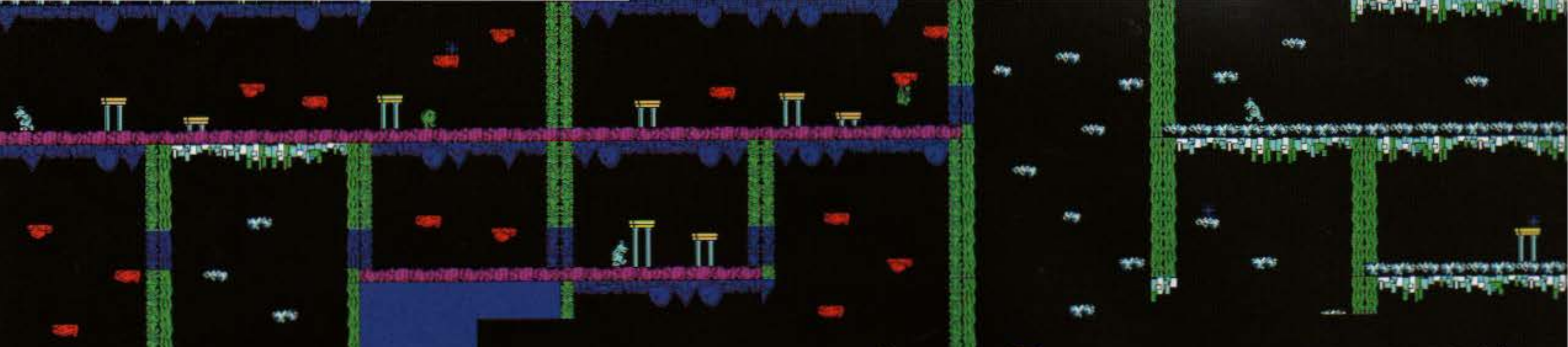


First known as *Moon Munching Moles From Mars, Nodes Of Yesod* (or more literally 'Moon's testicles') remains one of the most surreal and inspired curios in the retro game canon. Created during what might broadly be called the UK games industry's rock 'n' roll period, the game came out of Liverpool at a time when Software Projects, Thor and Imagine were employing raw teenage talent to come up with leftfield concepts such as *Jet Set Willy, Ah Diddums* and *Jack And The Beanstalk.*

Its psychedelic flavour certainly owes a debt to two contributors, **Marc Wilding** (its C64 coder) and **Stuart Fotheringham** (art design) both of whom had previously worked with Matthew Smith on the third and abortive *Jet Set Willy* title. "The three of us worked on *The Mega Tree* [*JSW3*] for three months and were called in to demo it for the Software Project directors," begins Fotheringham. "They were unimpressed with the single screen demo that we'd created so reassigned Marc and fired me. Matt was then given a desk in reception, so they could keep an eye on him, but unfortunately it was the end of his 8bit career."

Both Fotheringham and Wilding made a fresh start at Thor (which later became Odin) and were also joined by talented coder, **Steve Wetherill** (also ex Software Projects) and artist **Colin Grunes**.









CRASH SMASH

In a story that's become something of '80s coding folklore, the original *Nodes Of Yesod* was rumoured to have been lost in a Microdrive crash. Fotheringham (above right, with Odin director Mark Butler and their work area below) recalls: "Colin, Paul Salmon and I had been working for days on maps and layouts. Paul had already started work on *Robin Of The Wood* so Colin and I had the task of completing the 256 screens. We worked like dogs for a week or so and then had a final push to meet a development deadline. We stayed up all night and finished the screens. It was about 4am and we were reviewing the maps and playing them though when the Sinclair Microdrive went nuts and ate the tape. We tried the backup but that was gone too."

After this calamity the Microdrives were binned and the team moved onto Spectrum Disciple Drives with all the data uploaded to BBC development systems as an extra precaution. Although the entire map layout had been lost, Fotheringham and Grunes remembered much of their topography and spent the weekend doing the entire thing again. But Grunes notes ruefully, "I recall feeling the new version just did not live up to the levels that were lost. Stuart and I are the only ones who actually played them."



"I'd created a character called Bunty Bagman on the C64 and came up with the idea of producing a game based on Noddy," picks up Grunes. "We developed a single screen demo of Big Ears walking back and forth and a large ball which bounced around the screen. But the licence came to nothing. I then changed the character of Big Ears into Charlie Fotheringham-Grunes [*Nodes*' hero] by sticking a space helmet and backpack on him and we went to see Thor. I remember Paul McKenna, the boss of Thor, was just closing up his garage on an industrial estate and he was with a large van full of Thor's *Jack And The Beanstalk*. This meeting led directly to *Nodes Of Yesod* and the creation of Odin Computer Graphics."

Around this time the industry was transitioning to small office-based teams and away from bedroom coders working through the night. But the new culture wasn't exactly adopted wholesale by these young coders barely out of school. "Odin's offices were located in an office complex in Liverpool's city centre," recalls Fotheringham. "Most days we'd leave work at 7pm and go to the pub, then go clubbing until 2am, then go back to the office to sleep under the desks, and then get up when the admin staff turned up at 9am. Some days we also went to the pub next door at lunchtime; conveniently the emergency exit from our office was opposite and we could slip in without the boss or sales staff noticing and play pool for a couple of hours. Paul McKenna used to keep a freezer full of pies and pasties, so we could feed ourselves without going out too. So all in all, we rarely went home."



The first task in *Nodes* was to capture a friendly Moon mole, which became an essential tool for eating through cavern walls once below the surface. It was a cute feature, but one that also added immensely to the sense of exploration

Yet the game that finally emerged from this exuberant team instantly impressed with its stunning 8bit visuals and fluid animation. The premise was based on 2001: A Space Odyssey, and tasked players with discovering eight 'alchiems' on the moon to unlock the secrets of a black monolith which had been sending strange messages to Earth. Although its flick-screen structure was nothing new, the beautiful environments, gravity effects and the novelty of collecting a moon munching mole to eat through cavern walls made it one of the most popular games in its day and a cult classic ever since.

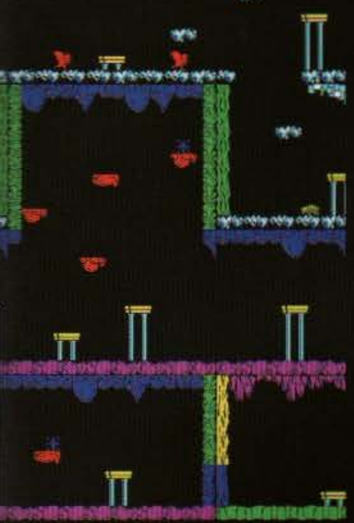
The humour was decidedly British, and with a name like Charlemagne Fotheringham-Grunes (named of course after two members of the team), instructions that included a message emanating from a rhododendron bush, butter, dripping and kippers plus a command to find the 'erbschectt' responsible for the monolith it was a game steeped in Monty Python surrealism and a kind of adolescent playfulness that characterised games of the period. One of the rooms was even created to resemble a purple-headed penis.

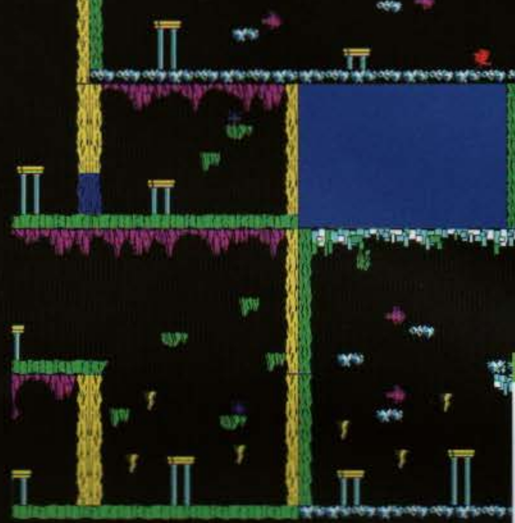
"The challenge was trying to give it a visual wow factor," continues Grunes. "I would spend hours and days on Melbourne Draw agonising over every pixel. A typical example of this is the somersault, which had a smooth 16 frames, which was double or triple the standards of the time. Then there was the diamond floor in one of the cavern scenes. I tried to make this look as non-Spectrum as possible and this came about by trying to break up the blocky appearance of the paper and ink attributes. I think the biggest barriers were on the coding side, the game had to be rewritten by Steve Wetherill as the original programmer assigned to the project was not up to the standards we expected. Steve had to work around our game design and graphics, and he was an exceptional talent."

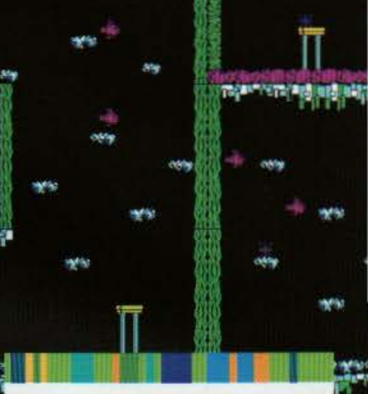
Gameplay balancing and accurate positioning of the platforms soon became a focus. Wetherill created a level editor that enabled the speedy positioning of ceilings, floors and platforms, along with controlling 'Astro Charlie' to ensure every jump was possible. But the lack of a design document also proved problematic. "Somebody would say: 'So why don't the gravity sticks work?', and I'd think: 'What the heck is a gravity stick?' recounts











Wetherill. "Or: 'How come there is no Monolith Room at the end of the game?' and so on. However, I think my biggest challenge overall was trying to make sure that the quality of the code matched the obvious quality of the art."

But Nodes wasn't just based on Kubrick's seminal movie, Fotheringham admits he took the moon surface from the unreleased Imagine 'megagame' *Bandersnatch* after taping Commercial Breaks, a BBC documentary about the company's collapse. He simply paused the tape and 'nicked' the craters, rock effects and the colour scheme. The hero's somersault was inspired by the animation in the C64 classic *Impossible Mission* and structurally the entire project owed a debt to Ultimate's platformer, *Underwurlde*.



Cuddly teddy bears on springs may have been typical videogame enemies for the period but they were certainly deadly to Astro Charlie. Any contact with them would send him tumbling around the screen, losing energy in the process

Indeed, it was no secret that Odin openly set out to emulate the games produced by Ultimate and great effort was put into adverts, box art and premium boxing for the title. *Nodes* also shared *Underwurlde*'s high level of difficulty with a huge 256-screen map to explore, creatures that could send the hero bouncing around with terrible energy sapping consequences and no saves whatsoever. Red spacesuited mercenaries would also appear to steal alchiems, increasing the difficulty still further. None of the Odin team finished the game in its final form.

Despite this, *Nodes Of Yesod* went on to become one of the most popular games of the mid '80s, spawned a sequel, *Arc Of Yesod*, and its art style and surreal tendencies were also prevalent in Odin's last great game, *Heartland*. But soon after this Odin lost its way, and when a deal was struck with Telecomsoft (owned by British Telecom) to come up with ten games in one year most of the team dispersed. The conveyor belt nature of producing so many games in such a short period clearly had a huge impact on creativity and quality.

Nodes Of Yesod was very much a product of its time, a time when project management was non-existent and short development cycles encouraged risk taking

Nodes Of Yesod was very much a product of its time, a time when project management was non-existent and short development cycles encouraged risk taking. It was also a period in which summoning the devil to kill one of your teammates didn't even warrant a written warning. "We came back from a club and Stuart and I were arguing," recalls Wilding. "It was something to do with the possibility of making people insane using black magic. Anyway, he decided he was going to summon the devil to kill me so he made a pentagram in blood – his blood – and started chanting. I am pretty sure he was making it all up, but I was not certain. I slept a little uneasily that night. I remember crawling under my desk and telling the other guys who were still working: 'If a hairy devil comes in, tell him to fuck off.'

After working for EA on projects such as the *Command & Conquer* series, Wetherill now has little time for devil worship and owns his own mobile development company, Uztek Games. In 2003 he created a version of *Nodes Of Yesod* for the Pocket PC and has been working on the game for mobile handsets. While nothing official has been announced, fans will be interested to find a working demo of the game at odincomputergraphics.com

Such projects show there's still a great deal of interest and fun to be had from the quintessential *Nodes Of Yesod* formula. It may have been made too hard in its day, but it's testament to the game's visual excellence and exploratory charms that it's still so fondly remembered all these years later. And a purple-headed penis room? Unlikely to get past the submission censors today.





HEART OF YESOD

Shortly after Odin's demise, Wetherill proposed a third instalment to the *Yesod* series, but much like *Jet Set Willy 3* (or *The Mega Tree*) it came to nothing. All that's left of the proposal are three roughly typed sheets of paper setting out the premise for the game. Clearly inspired by The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and Mr Benn, it sees hero Charles Fotheringham-Grunes exploring distant lands via a portal in his attic. With four costumes to change into, including his trusted spacesuit, *Heart Of Yesod* was going to be a vertically scrolling platformer with a greater variety of enemies and environments and oblique references to other classic games such as *Manic Miner* and *Heartland*.





Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

NAME: Climax Racing – Brighton (Disney Interactive Studios)

DATE FOUNDED: 1999

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 105

KEY STAFF: Tony Beckwith (VP and general manager), Tom Williams (technical director) and Paul Ayliffe (art director)



URL: www.DISbrighton.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
ATV3, ATV4, ATV Pro, MotoGP'06







As the name implies, Climax Racing is a studio that makes racing games, both licensed and original. Its recent acquisition by Disney will not change that



LOCATION: Brighton

CURRENT PROJECTS: Just finishing *MotoGP'07* with THQ. From that point on the studio will be working on two big budget, original racing titles for 360 and PS3.

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Climax Racing was part of the Climax Group for six years. The studio was acquired by Disney last October and split off from the rest of Climax.

"The studio has survived where many others have fallen through professionalism, good working practices, strong tools and most importantly great staff. Our games have had both commercial and critical success, won many awards and we've worked on more than ten multi-platform releases.

"Our proprietary tools and technology have been a key factor – Tomcat makes artists much more productive and allows them to focus on creativity. Technology is consolidated, reused and iterated so, again, our guys get to focus on new, cutting edge stuff that makes a difference.

"People are the lifeblood of our studio. We empower them with excellent tools and agile development methodologies. We have very high standards and the level of talent in the studio is excellent. Brighton has always been our home. It's a great city. You've got the beach, the South Downs, shops, restaurants, clubs and pubs but also unique festivals, arts events and a vibrant music scene. Our office gives pretty much everyone a sea view and is right at the heart of the town – about two minutes walk from the beach.

"Disney acquired the studio in order to create original racing games. It's great to still have the small company culture but now backed with big company resources."



University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION NAME: University of Teesside, School of Computing

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 2,000

URL: http://www.tees.ac.uk/schools/SCM/

CONTACT: 01642 342652



KEY STAFF
Dr Derek Simpson, dean of school; Prof Marc Cavazza, assistant dean, research; Chris Williams, director of Animex; Mike Ablett, visualisation section leader

KEY ALUMNI
Jake Archibold, BSc multimedia, web designer at the BBC; Jane Mapps, MA creative digital media, interactive designer for Children's BBC and CBeebies; Lesley Black, MSc information technology, cancer information manager, South Tees NHS Trust; Andy Lomas, MSc computer animation and graphical technology applications, head of computer graphics at Framestore CFC







Teesside's facilities include a motion capture suite, music lab, PlayStation 2 development equipment and 550 workstations for students to make use of

UNIVERSITY OF TEESSIDE



LOCATION: Middlesbrough

COURSES OFFERED:

- BA (Hons) 3D reconstruction and visualisation
- BSc (Hons) animation and visual effects programming
- BA (Hons)/MA computer animation
- BA (Hons) creative visualisation
- BA (Hons) digital character animation
- BA (Hons) digital visual effects
- BA (Hons)/MA computer games art
- BA (Hons) computer games design
- BSc (Hons)/MSc computer games programming
- BSc (Hons) computer games science
- BA (Hons) digital music creation
- MSc computer animation and graphical technology

TESTIMONIAL – RICH CROWE BA (HONS) CREATIVE VISUALISATION



"I left a full-time job as a web/graphic designer in order to gain skills for the animation industry and came to Teesside due to the outstanding reputation of the university. During my time here, I have developed new skills such as 2D animation and 3D modelling and I have been able to implement these skills for several commercial websites.

"My final-year project is a short CGI animation and is a prologue to a larger scale idea that I have been developing. It is intended to showcase my modelling ability with objects, ranging from machinery and architecture to natural landscape. The story shows a space probe landing on a dark, seemingly deserted planet. Scanning the area, the probe is drawn to a large out-of-place rock, which appears to have a structure carved directly into it. Panning around the structure, the probe discovers a giant robot, almost as large as the structure, sitting on a throne. As the sun breaks over the horizon, the robot slowly comes to life."

Engine overhaul

Unreal Engine 3 is the industry's number one middleware, so will the entrance of Crytek's CryEngine 2 change the situation?


Harald Seeley, development director, Crytek

Perhaps it's no surprise **Mark Rein** is getting hot under the collar. Epic Games' affably combative vice president is often at the centre of gaming press attention, and he always gives better than he gets.

"It kills me when people say we have no competition," he says. "There are lots of different engines people use to make games. Lots of people use Gamebryo. Lots of people use their own engines."

Still, the question that kick-started this exchange was relatively anodyne; just along the lines that with German developer Crytek starting to offer its CryEngine 2 commercially, the engine market was going to get more interesting. Maybe Crytek's entrance would keep Epic and its market-leading Unreal Engine 3 on its toes.

"I probably get a little defensive when people say we don't have any competition," Rein ponders some moments later. "We certainly don't think that. If we had no competition why aren't half the games using Unreal?"

But that's probably what most industry outsiders do think. Unreal Engine 3 has been the success story of the middleware market for PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 and PC. (There's no support for Wii yet, and probably won't be for a while, if ever.) As well as dozens of developers such as Gearbox, Silicon Knights and Realtime Worlds, most of the big global publishers, such as EA, Sony, Microsoft, NCsoft, Midway, Capcom, Square Enix, Activision, Ubisoft and THQ, also have site-wide licences to use the technology as well.

Yet for all its success, Epic remains a peculiar example of a middleware company. Few other vendors also create games alongside technology. Equally, only a handful of game developers have proved organised enough to be able to offer support and all the other secondary requirements needed to make in-house technology commercially available. However, Rein says it's only the combination of being a game developer and an engine company that has allowed Epic to flourish.

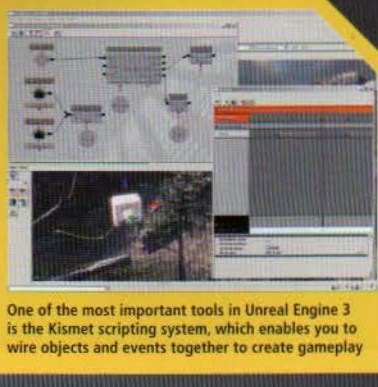
"The middleware market's a tough market," he says. "I don't think we could survive as a middleware-only company."

"If we had no competition why aren't half the games using Unreal? We certainly don't think that"

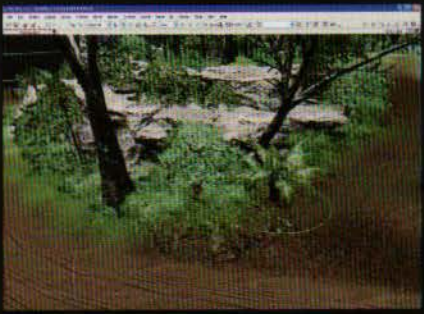
Unreal Engine

One huge advantage possessed by Epic is its Integrated Partners Program (IPP). This makes full use of the engine's features and modularity by enabling smaller middleware companies to integrate their smarts into the Unreal Engine, creating a seamless production process for clients who choose to buy those extra components. As part of the deal the technology partners also have to make sure that they keep up-to-date with new versions of the Unreal Engine, making the process relatively painless for clients, as well as providing a huge commercial opportunity for the smaller companies. To that extent, the success of Unreal Engine means the IPP has become a valuable secondary sales channel.

At present there are 11 companies in the Integrated Partners Program. Technologies on offer include networking (Quazal's Render-Vous and Spark), physics (Ageia's PhysX), AI (Engenuity's AI.implant and Kynogon's Kynapse), facial animation and customisation tools (OC3's FaceFX and Digimask's Digimask), realtime lighting (Geomeric's Enlighten) and procedural content tools (IDV's SpeedTree and Allegorithmic's ProFX). Other included technologies are Bink video playback and Fonix voice recognition.


One of the most important tools in Unreal Engine 3 is the Kismet scripting system, which enables you to wire objects and events together to create gameplay

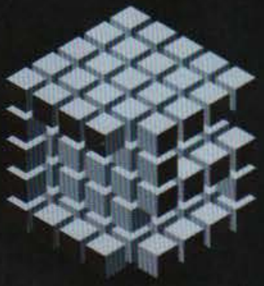




One of the advances for newly developed games is the ability for in-game objects to have inherent knowledge of how they should react when manipulated by events. Crytek calls this Smart Objects (above). Beautiful outdoor environments are a characteristic of Crytek's technology, but what's more important are realtime gameplay tools which combine rendering, AI and physics within a sandbox editor

A standout feature of CryEngine is its realistic and lush vegetation, which is laid out using procedural techniques





What's even more surprising about Epic is that despite being only 80 people strong, it doesn't demarcate between those people working on games like *Gears Of War* and *Unreal Tournament III* and those supporting external clients using Unreal Engine 3.

"All the developers on the game projects support the engine," Rein explains. "That's what licensees want. They want to talk to someone who's actually making a game with the technology when they have questions about how to make a game with it.

"If you have a question about physics, James Golding will answer your question. If it's about rendering Andrew Scheidecker or Tim Sweeney will answer your question. And if you had a question about design, maybe Cliffy would answer your question. That's the only way to do it. That's why we're successful. It's not just a coincidence."

The situation's very different over at Crytek. Relative new boys into the middleware scene, the company's only just sold the first licence for its CryEngine 2. Previously it had sold some licences of its *Far Cry* engine, but development director **Harald Seeley** says that was a learning process.

"We weren't ready to go into the licensing business with *Far Cry*," he explains. "We were too young and too small a company. We didn't know what it would take to make our engine work in different types of games."

Like Rein, he also emphasises the importance of support though, even if Crytek is taking a different approach. "Having learned from the experience of *Far Cry*, we know it [support] will take a very experienced team," Seeley says. "We can bring new people in, but they will have to deal with the learning curve before they can take over the reins, so in the short term, we'll have to take some of our best people out of production."

Less surprisingly, Seeley's keen to stress the differences between CryEngine 2 and Unreal Engine 3.

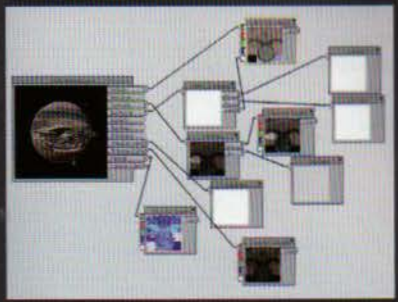
"I think we're targeting different markets. They are targeting wide, we are targeting deep," he explains. "We're looking for the client who wants their product to stand out from the crowd. Unfortunately, the more successful Unreal becomes, the more level that playing field becomes, and easier it becomes to get lost in the crowd, because what do you have that the next client doesn't have? That's why we developed our own engine. We had to stand out from the competition."

In order to ensure the teams who license CryEngine 2 don't suffer from the same problems, Seeley says, Crytek will be highly selective about who gets their hands on the technology.

"We're not being real aggressive about it," he says, referring to the commercial rollout. "We want people to take their time and make sure it's the right tool for them. We're going to pick the right people to work with. Not every studio will benefit from CryEngine 2. It takes a lot of talent to make a tree look that good. And it's not just about the engine. It's about dedication and artistic vision too."

Of course, taking an overall view of the entire engine market, it's a much more complex place than a head-to-head deathmatch between Epic and Crytek. Long-term players such as Emergent with its Gamebryo engine and Touchdown's Jupiter engine compete too, and then there's the likes of Trinigy, Vicious and Instinct, plus PC-only technologies such as id's Doom 3 engine and Valve's Source. Indeed, at present the CryEngine 2 only supports PC although work is continuing on other platforms, and no one yet has an optimised PlayStation 3 version of their technology.

Nevertheless, Crytek's commercial launch of CryEngine 2 is significant; two of the world's best developers are now actively licensing their technology. Of course, nobody knows how the competition between the two will work out in the future, but pure technology players without the gravitas of in-house game development will certainly find it harder.





One reason *Gears Of War* looks so good is Unreal Engine 3's inbuilt shader and materials system, which enables artists to visually construct the look of in-game objects



Making Gears Of War Golf

Rein (above) is often annoyed that people think the Unreal Engine 3 is only good for making firstperson shooters. "People used to say we were just a FPS engine, but following *Gears*, at least we're a first and thirdperson engine," he jokes.

But his point is a serious one. "People still say to me, your engine's not that suitable for our game," he adds. For that reason, one cute internal project at Epic saw a rough-and-ready golf game created using the Unreal Engine and assets from *Gears Of War*.

"We were talking to a Korean publisher about using Unreal to make casual games," Rein reveals. "So we got an animator to make a golf swing for Marcus [Fenix], and then a programmer took one of the *Gears* levels and added some mounds and stuff to make a course. Before you teed off, there was a preview of a hole just like *Tiger Woods* and then the camera went back to Marcus with his club."

Neatly, the game's grenade launching mechanic was used to aim and hit the ball. "It was all done in UnrealScript without changing any source code, and only took a day to do," Rein says.

Similarly he hopes games such as Artificial Studios' top-down melee title *Monster Madness* and Naked Sky's Xbox Live Arcade game *RoboBlitz* will start to stretch the imagination of publishers. "You can use Unreal for a puzzle game, a sidescroller or a golf game. Midway's using it for the next *Mortal Kombat*. I think that will help break the mould."



BY JEFF MINTER

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

THE GIRAFFE CREEPS EVER NEARER

Yesterday, I finished *Space Giraffe*. That is to say, I finished all the *Space Giraffe* gameplay. A hundred levels plus bonus rounds all in and working. In reality though we've still got a few weeks' work to do on all the auxiliary stuff that's needed to get the thing through certification and actually out there, so it's probably going to be at least another six weeks to two months from the time of writing this until the game actually appears for download on XBLA.

In truth it's pretty much all there – leaderboards work, pause mode brings up its relevant menu and all functions behave as they should, you can quit to Arcade like you should, and such – anyone looking at the game would see it for what it is, a completed and fully-working XBLA title. But the scrutiny needed to get through the milestones of Microsoft certification is much more pernickety than just a few goes and an acknowledgement that it seems to be OK – there are documents which detail hundreds of specific behaviours to which the title must conform; and so the next two or three weeks will be spent by us studying those documents in minute detail and making sure the game is properly compliant in all respects.

Then there's beta testing to be done, and checking for bugs (of which, thank Goat, I don't think we have too many serious ones; neither I nor any of the alpha team has seen a genuine crash bug in several weeks of gameplay), so hopefully anything that does show up will be along the lines of minor tweaks and fixes rather than desperate and gnarly debug runs.

At some point in the next few weeks it'll go up on Partnernet, where all the upcoming XBLA games go to hang out for a while (which is how I was playing the *Jetpac* remake while people on the net were still only speculating as to the possibility of its existence) and that will be an interesting time for me to be watching the leaderboards, as at that point a lot of other developers and journalists will be able to get their hands on my precious baby. In fact, leaderboard-watching is going to be a source of some fascination, not only at that time but also when the full game goes out for real. Really wringing the best scores out of the giraffe demands from players an understanding of how the game works, and specifically an understanding that it is not just *Tempest* all over again, since *Tempest* techniques don't really get you a lot of points, whereas the new, *Giraffe*-specific ones do. It'll be intriguing to see how quickly players cotton on to that. I've never had the opportunity to be able to observe live and in realtime how players all over the world are doing on a newly-released game. Really looking forward to that bit.

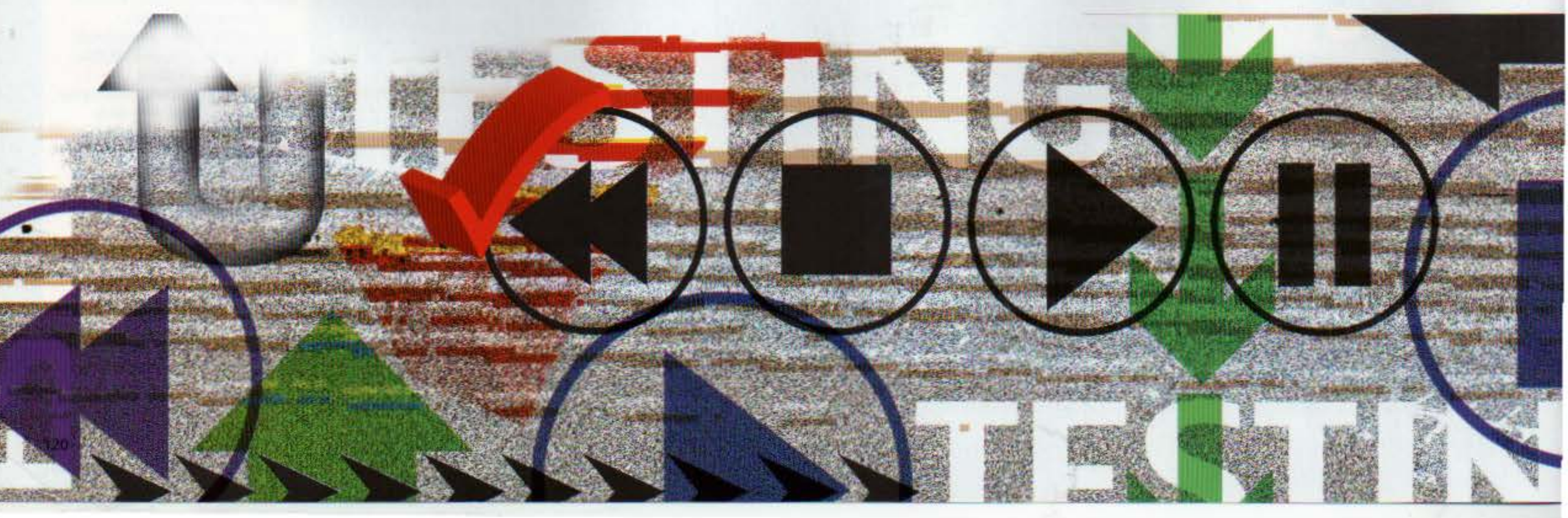
> "You have to trap out every eventuality, even those where you might think: 'But surely no idiot would ever try doing that!'"

These next few weeks are probably going to be simultaneously the worst bit and the best bit of the development – worst, because test and certification are never particularly fun, given that you basically have to submit your game to people who will scrutinise it and nitpick at every little detail; the creative work is over and now you just have to deal with people effectively moaning about all sorts of little things. But that's just normal when you work on a console. It's not like on the PC where you can just chuck out a file in any state you see fit. Console titles have to behave flawlessly despite the fact that they might have a button-mashing clueless idiot holding the joypad. You have to trap out every eventuality, even those where you might think: 'But surely no idiot would ever try doing that!' because you can be damn certain that some idiot out there definitely will try doing that. All those checklists and requirements aren't just there to provide hassle to the programmers – it's because Microsoft knows full well that someone out there will try holding down three buttons whilst holding their breath and simultaneously unplugging the network cable and their memory cartridge whilst standing on one leg on the third Tuesday of the month, so your game better not fall over when they do.

For all that this part of the process is largely comprised of stress and tedium in equal measure, it's also quite a good place to be, because you know that the real challenge – that of actually designing and implementing the game – is over now, and this last little period of intensity signifies the proximity of the end, of actually being completely finished, reaching the goal that through months and months of development just seemed like some distant time somewhere in the future, never sure when exactly it would be.

It's a nice time of year to be finishing a project, too. It's just starting to turn a bit spring-like, and the promise of a few weeks of no work and no pressure, and being able to just sit outside with the sheepies and enjoy the sun and the lovely countryside of Wales is very appealing after months and months spent trogloditic and hunched over a compiler.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser





BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

At a *Second Life* event in mid 2005, I attended a virtual party. On one virtual wall was a live video feed from a real-world party in a San Francisco building that looked the same. In the real world, a video screen played the image from the virtual event. Virtual worlds are entering a new phase, coming to grips with the realities of commerce and industry. At the same time, as real-world business gets to grips with virtual worlds, the two seem to be drawing closer – in ways like the virtual and real party, or the *World Of WarCraft* fan who wired up a treadmill via USB, so to run in his gnome shoes he had to move forward in the real world too. And now, for the first time, a full graphical virtual world can be accessed from a mobile phone.

Sulake Corporation, which developed the virtual world Habbo Hotel, had planned a mobile Habbo client almost from the beginning.

"The next phase in the early growth of virtual worlds seems to be to re-integrate the real, to bring the two more closely into line"

In 1999, two Finnish friends, **Sampo Karjalainen** and Aapo Kyrölä, made a web-based application called Mobiles Disco for their friends' band, which proved popular beyond their expectations. In partnership with the Finnish ad agency Taivas, the pair began to work on a commercial project, launched in 2000, which they christened Hotelli Kultakala – in the UK, Habbo Hotel. It was an isometric 2.5D world, where users could hang out, swim, dance, drink, attend seasonal and celebrity events and – crucially for their teen market and the profit margin of the company – buy furniture through micropayments, including mobile phone billing. By the end of 2004 there were 16 Habbo Hotels in four different continents and 160 Sulake staff members. By some measures, Habbo is one of our largest virtual worlds, with 74 million characters created to date, in 29 countries on five continents – and an enviable revenue of €28.5 million (£19.3 million) in 2005. Right from the start of development in 2000, they began mobile development alongside the PC client and their micropayment system, but it wasn't until 2003 that they realised Nokia's S60 platform was capable of a more complete Habbo Hotel client. "In 2004 we developed two prototypes for S60 in which we solved most of the user interface and network communication issues. But unfortunately S60 smart phones and Habbo's target group don't match very well. Teens don't have these fancy phones. And you can't do a virtual world with mobile Java and low-end phones, Karjalainen told me.

Now, though, the terrain is changing, with lower-end Java-capable phones almost at the point where they can support a mobile virtual world client. The question remains, though, whether such mobile access points to virtual worlds were needed or desired. When we're moving around, we need to pay more attention to the real world. In that situation, do we need a window into our new connected electric lands? "One thing about virtual worlds remained a bit of a question: Are virtual world as desirable on mobile phones as on PCs?" Karjalainen says. "Mobile phones are usually used in situations where there's other things around you begging for attention. And mobile apps are used for shorter periods. On the other hand, realtime virtual worlds require full attention. Your attention can kind of be either in first life or second life, not in both. So question is how does the change of context affect the use of a Habbo-like virtual world?" So, in December 2006, Sulake released Mini Friday, a Habbo Hotel-style client for a mobile phone. At the moment, Mini Friday is still a reduced version of Habbo. You can buy a drink, dance, sit and chat, and that's about it.

Still, as an experiment, Karjalainen sees it as an early success. Without any Mini Friday promotion, in three months they have 10,000 registered clients. To solve the problem of Mini Friday's overpopulation, there is a basic room system, with each visitor allocated to a random numbered room; you can ask the bartender to tell you which room a friend is in. By my own straw polls, most are from northern Europe and Russia; I spoke to three Russian web developers on the Mini Friday dancefloor.

Our journey into virtual worlds so far has been about conquering geography, replacing it with something that more closely fits our desires. The whole initial purpose of virtual worlds was to ensure that where you were in the real world didn't matter. The next phase in the early growth of virtual worlds seems to be to re-integrate the real, to bring the two more closely into line – and mobile virtual worlds may be crucial to this shift. "I think virtual worlds are becoming really mainstream," Karjalainen says. "Sony's Home is one example of this. There will be more browser-based casual virtual worlds as well. Virtual property economy will expand.

"At the same time the novelty value can wear off. The actual motivations for using them and what you do inside them will become more important. I think the boundaries of real and virtual worlds can mix. If augmented reality technologies move forward, virtual worlds can truly mix with the real world."

Tim Guest's book about virtual worlds, Second Lives, will be published by Hutchinson in April. Visit him at timguest.net





BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

CHANGE IS IN THE AIR

A wise man once said that nothing ever lasts for ever. Admittedly, he also said "C-c-c-cucumber, c-c-c-cabbage, c-c-c-cauliflower, men on Mars, April showers, oh oh oh oh", so maybe he was in actual fact a semi-literate knob-end. Nevertheless, change is at hand, and you'd better get used to it.

Who, back in 1992, could have predicted that the glorious Sega empire wouldn't last a billion years? Who, back in 1979, would have believed that within a decade Atari would be all but hobbled, or that home computers would stride past consoles as the gaming format of choice? Who could ever have foreseen the hilarious fall of Commodore, or the formerly glorious computer giant's inept attempts to shore up its failing business with a series of increasingly desperate fumbles for the zeitgeist?

But that's the games industry for you. The one constant is that it's constantly shifting. The balance of power moves and, from time to time, there's a mass extinction event wherein lots of people lose their jobs. Or, at least, are bought out by software giants, and get forced at gunpoint to make cheap and cheerful collect 'em ups based upon lacklustre animated movies starring, I dunno, anthropomorphic pies.

As I write this, business pundits are predicting that the next collapse of the games industry is imminent. Indeed, SCEE has just informed its staff to expect redundancies as it prepares to face up to the challenges ahead. Specifically, the challenges presented by 'a period of transition where some of the fundamentals of our business are changing'. Although, y'know, it might probably, at a push, also have something ever so slightly to do with the fact the "record-breaking" PS3 hasn't exactly set the gaming world ablaze as they'd hope...

Now, I'm no business expert – in fact, I'm some sort of big, drunk, idiot – but I've always felt that the games industry was run by people who didn't really know what they were doing. I'm not going to pretend for a moment that I'm some great gaming guru, but in most cases I've found it pretty easy to predict when we were on the verge of another epoch-making balls-up. The reason I've found it pretty easy is that the people who run the games industry keep doing really stupid things. In fact, there's a heritage of incompetence that stretches from Atari suing Activision, to the 32X, past the 3DO, right up to the mistakes of the modern era.

Couple that to the fact that hardware and software is rendered obsolete every five or six years, and you're faced with an industry built upon a bedrock of boom and bust. Part of the problem is that there seems to be a collective madness among the console giants – the hard-won, quiet dignity of Nintendo aside – to be the biggest, the noisiest, or the most expensive.

> With the costs of developing for the new super-consoles so high, it's unrealistic to make a single format title and expect to make money

The race to have the most powerful hardware has always struck me as not merely a game of willy-waving one-upmanship, but actively counter-productive from a business perspective. I mean, Sony and Microsoft are losing hundreds of pounds for every console they sell. Who would be stupid enough to enter into a market where that happens?

Admittedly, when you've got as much money as they have you can afford to take risks – and we shouldn't forget that, unlike previous market leaders, neither Sony nor Microsoft have all their eggs in just the videogame basket – but the people who suffer, much as they did the last time the market crashed, are the foot soldiers; the developers, and the small publishers.

To wit: the people who make the games to play on the consoles that Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo have made.

With the costs of developing for the new super-consoles so astronomically high, it's unrealistic to develop a single format title and expect to make money on it. For most developers and publishers the only way forward is multi-format strategy – as demonstrated by the all-too-familiar brands in the PlayStation 3 launch line-up – but that just renders a multi-format market utterly pointless.

Not only that, but it makes for a very insecure development environment. The only people with the security to develop innovative titles – step forward *LittleBigPlanet* (it's innovative, yes, but I'm not convinced it'll be a breakthrough, format-defining hit) – are the ones nestled within the bosom of the hardware giants. And I don't know exactly how healthy that is.

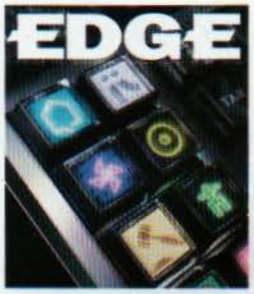
The PlayStation Network, Nintendo's Virtual Console and Xbox Live Arcade are doubtless the early blossomings of the future of software distribution. Hopefully it'll grant some smaller operations the ability to release some novel, low-risk product that can keep them afloat while the big boys battle it out, but I'm certain that we're years away from a point where physical product is entirely done away with. It just isn't yet practical with the incumbent generation of systems.

Still, Sister Change is the handmaiden of the games industry, and there's no point me weeping about it.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Inbox



Issue 175

ONLINE OFFLINE
Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Two Worlds: Move over *Oblivion*?

Anyone else interested in this one? It's part *Oblivion* and also part *WOW/Guild Wars* - it has a separate MMO segment. *Oblivion* has been the one to beat, I wonder if this will take its crown?
Chief

More orcs and goblins? When will developers learn we're not all emo 12-year-olds?
Escape

I'd rather have more orcs and goblins than more generic futuristic FPSs.
Bombfrog

Personally, I'd rather have an 'orcs and goblins' game than yet another generic JRPG with the same old gameplay they've had since *Final Fantasy I*.
Chief

Why is everyone saying I'd rather have generic game 1 (orcs) than generic game 2?
My point is that I'm tired of cliched characters, which accounts for about 98% of titles in development.
Escape

Did Andrew Howlett and Marcus Waldock (**E**175) actually read Alex Westworth's letter (**E**174)? Because I think they missed the key issue that Mr Westworth was raising: the Xbox 360 isn't better than the Wii because the games look better.

It's something I hear on a near day-by-day basis and it grinds on me too. Games consoles should be about the games. That's the reason we're here, that's the reason we bought our first console; we want to play games, good games that we'll play over and over!

OK, Mr Westworth did some hating in his letter but he was illustrating his point (and ranting). The fact that this is the part of the letter you decided to focus your comments on renders your arguments (as Mr Howlett states) "childish insult hurling".

Personally I think Nintendo have the right idea with the Wii, focusing on innovative gameplay (they're certainly not clinging to the past). Keep it in mind that the Wii and PS3 are both new consoles and have a lot of growing up to do. Give them a year and then see how big a 'market leader' the 360 is.

I'm sure that Mr Westworth wanted to get this off his chest in **Edge** because he was under the impression he would be among mature and knowledgeable readers. Instead his remarks were greeted with the same disregard you would expect of "stick thin pre-pubescent males".
Leanne Bayley

It has to be said, in the interest of balanced debate, that more of our mailbag has agreed wth Andrew Howlett than Leanne Bayley. Here's hoping Alex Westworth stirs up as passionate a response in his pupils

I can't go anywhere now without drawing little loops around trees. It's impossible to look at cherry blossom anymore without conjuring imagery of life erupting from the ground in tsunamis of vibrant colour. The night sky has renewed significance as stars beckon with concealed patterns and the possibility of secret powers.

"I can't go anywhere without drawing little loops around trees. The night sky has renewed significance as stars beckon. This is what Okami has done to me"

This is what *Okami* has done to me. And this is the first game in years my wife has expressed any interest in. Thirty hours into the game, we're still booting up the PS2 with an air of anticipation. Stories unfold within stories, characters deepen, new challenges emerge – and it never feels forced. This is simply the most elegantly designed game I've played.

It's really made me realise how lazy games have become. Sim after sim, gun after gun – suddenly these pursuits feel desperately immature, heavy-handed and lacking in intelligence. Are most games simply substituting real-world intelligence for the sake of better AI and graphics at the cost of genuinely imaginative entertainment?

I've played more than my fair share of shooters, jumpers and adventures – but *Okami* is the first game I've ever played that's inspired a sense of hope. Amaterasu's quest to spread happiness and love while eradicating evil may sound a little lame in the current political climate, but in a world of people who sometimes appear to be losing sight of the simple joy of existence, *Okami* is a beautifully executed and gentle reminder of how games should be. Just a game?
Dr Barry J Gibb

There's no doubting *Okami*'s place as a milestone – giving a sense of hope for the evolution of games, if nothing else


Win a DS Lite for the best letter

I've done a lot of bad things over the years in videogames, from shooting innocents in *Splinter Cell* to decapitating people with a single uppercut in *Mortal Kombat*. I've never questioned my actions in videogames until recently though, and it took a largely blood- and gore-less game for me to do it.

I live in Japan, and largely that means following game plots is pretty difficult. I can play *Zelda* with a dictionary since the dialogue is all in text, but when it comes to Japanese voice-overs, I can understand every fifth word if lucky. I generally find that most 360 games come with the English language on disc, so with that in mind I bought *Tomb Raider Legend*.

As it turns out, *TRL* doesn't have the English language on disc, just the Japanese voice-over dubbed on. Still, I reasoned, it doesn't take much to

understand *Tomb Raider*, and I can still take in the platforming fun, surely?

I was proved wrong about five minutes in. The first NPC Lara encounters in the game is a man walking around wearing black. And I was told to kill him. In no uncertain terms, the tutorial in the HUD told me how to lock on and shoot him until he was dead. Even though it's something I, and most people have done countless times in games, here, largely (I hope) because I didn't grasp the opening cut-scenes properly, I was left with a bunch of ethical questions. The game wanted him dead. I couldn't choke him unconscious, or even knock him out with a kick, because you don't learn that until level 2 for some bizarre reason. With a heavy heart I did the dirty deed, but have found it difficult to come back to the game since.

It's odd. Games have definitely become more graphic in their depictions of violence, but if my experience is anything to go by, more complicated ethically too. Back when I played any number of *Ikari Warriors*-esque shmups, the caveman 'me good, them bad' approach was enough, but now, I need something more. *Splinter Cell Double Agent* gets kudos for at least trying to ask important questions to test our moral fibre, although it really just boiled down to basic resource management in the end.

I don't know. Am I not alone in this, or am I about to join Jack Thompson on his moralistic crusade battle bus?
Christopher Charlton



Christopher Charlton points out that just because *Tomb Raider Legend* isn't gory doesn't mean it should be exempt from making a case for the validity of its violence

For all the talk of violence in games and the importance of context, it's amazing how often this simple litmus test is overlooked – and a reminder of it is well worth this month's DS

Compulsive lister that I am, I recently compiled my own top 100 videogames for no reason other than to keep myself entertained one afternoon. The usual suspects were there (do any **Edge** readers not have the N64's Holy Trinity somewhere in their top 30?), but of more interest were the number of games that in some way use music as an important theme. I always knew I was a bit of a rhythm action junkie, and a sure fire way of making me part with my cash is to stick the words Q Entertainment somewhere on the back of the box, but the whole exercise did make me wonder why I love these games so much. Would *Lumines*, *Rez* or even *SSX3* be half as enjoyable if music wasn't so highly integrated in their make-up?

"Music, and creating music, appeals to a base instinct in the human mind. Games are in a position to exploit this. They can make the talentless talented."

Of course not. Music, and creating music, appeals to a very base instinct in the human mind. Every culture, no matter how remote, has created sounds and arranged melodies to entertain and enlighten their communities, and also to create a sense of connectivity. Games are in a unique position to exploit this desire. They can make the talentless become talented.

As a child, I was encouraged to play a musical instrument but I always gave up after a number of weeks. *Lumines* enabled me to perform a techno concept album to a crowd of millions without missing a beat. *Rhythm Tengoku* graced me with the ability to be funkier than Bootsy Collins. *FreQuency*, by placing the discipline in a score attack arena, has finally given me the patience to learn a musical instrument. *FreQuency* gave me instant results, a goal to aim for and a lovely award for achieving it, either a wondrous light show, a higher number, or the joy of being part of creating an Orbital track.

Which is why I think it's a shame that many games studios are ignoring this. Harmonix, and I can hardly blame them after the phenomenal success of *Guitar Hero*, seems to be moving away from creating music and towards performing music; a subtle but important difference. My heart skipped a beat during your recent interview with Mizuguchi when he suggested he might move away from games and into music proper. Even worse, are the large number of games using licensed tracks without investigating how these tracks integrate with their play; sticking them in because its what the kids like. Games have the power to make us all feel like we're part of something special. It's a shame that so few seem loathe to do so.
Jason Scott

The DS remains a stronghold for this, with *Band Bros*, *Electroplankton* and guitar-sim *Jam Sessions* on the way



Barry Gibb finds a sense of hope in *Okami*, but will other games be able to build on it?

F

Topic: Augmented reality and it's gaming applications

I attended a tech demo presentation of augmented reality yesterday, and started to think about gaming applications.

In the everyday world this can be used as a point and click device, you point a camera-enabled PDA phone and it tells you how far away it is, what it is, if its a pub you'd get opening times etc.

The idea of augmented reality is to superimpose graphics, audio and other sense enhancements over a real world environment in realtime, thus augmenting the user's perception and interaction with his/her surroundings. By viewing the world through an AR system, it is possible to see a building on a street before it was built, identify locations by their virtual labels, tour ancient ruins with a virtual tour guide. The equipment could be worn with the image beamed onto the inside of your glasses, or you could se a camera enabled PDA point and click set up.

It's the glasses environment that excites me. You will still see the normal world in perfect 20/20 but AR can be superimposed using GPS accuracy. Imagine the gaming possibilities when coupled with motion-sensitive devices?

Minkymu

Have you played *GRAW*?

MarshallStaxx

Never mind *GRAW* there's already games out there using this tech. I've seen a mobile phone game that uses the camera and you shoot aliens that appear by moving the phone. I also think there's a *Pac-Man* style game that uses GPS and the camera.

Pretty interesting stuff, but think its a while off before we see proper games.

Mintfresh

I wonder why it hasn't been taken further?

When you think about, if you build a film set, and give people blank-firing rounds, it's the ultimate FPS.

Impactor 2.0

I would like to comment on the letter by Mr Piers in regards to used game sales from **E**174. His argument that pre-owned stock is so dominant in gaming, unlike other forms of entertainment, is flat out false. In fact, people run businesses on the sale of nothing except used books, DVDs or CDs. They're everywhere and this is proven by the fact that even major motorway services carry used DVDs and CDs. You'll also find that the gaming industry, by far, complains about used product sale more than the other entertainment industries.

Gaming's biggest problem is that it's low on variety and innovation while being high on bleeding edge technology and safe-bet game design. To most people *GRAW* is not that different from *Halo* and *Virtua Fighter* is *Tekken*'s twin. Combine that with prices rising with

Continued

each generation and it's no wonder most people don't see the value in gaming and choose to pick entertaining that requires less effort and less money. As long as the industry continues down this route it will never be more than teenage boy entertainment that most people will never take seriously and deservingly so.
William Baer

But when was the last time you saw a second-hand rack in Waterstones selling books for 90 per cent of the price they would be brand new?

It's nice to see the quality of writing in games/games as art debate is still raging on, despite little evidence that there's any progression – at least, not from where I'm sitting. Your article Play-Pen (E175) ended with the statement: 'As games progress further in developing their own unifying creative voice, it's likely that both sources of inspiration [films and literature] will prove equally important.' Shame then, that these influences seem to be drawn from mediocrity, at least insofar as the results would indicate – we have a long way to go before gamers get to experience the moral dilemma of the likes of Raskolnikov in Crime And Punishment, or traversing the disorientating, psychological labyrinth of The Trial. At best, video games attempt to emulate the personality traits and inflections of their literary counterparts, while character progression is often lacking. Threats and dangers to the player are physical entities, and one's progress through the game is achieved through dexterity, timing and puzzle solving – rarely intellectualised or tempered with emotional resonance.

But it's perhaps more than that: in turning to films and books for inspiration, game writers seem to miss the true potential of the medium of games, in which the player becomes the arbiter of the character's fate through actions which, ostensibly at least, should reinforce or alter the moral compass of the character. In that sense, it's all very well to draw on cinema and literature for aesthetics and characterisation, but given the interactivity of games it would be foolish to derive a sense of narrative and structure from these mediums as well – for games to truly shine as a new and unique art form, they must transcend the existing conventions of storytelling to accommodate the player's desire to guide and shape the outcome themselves.
Andy Dilks

F

Topic: God, I feel old

The ZX Spectrum is 25 years old. Still got the functioning rubber keyboard in my loft, actually got it out and got it working a few months ago.

Brings a tear to my eye.

HeThinksAgain

My best mate recently brought up his Speccy +3 and a huge box of original games from his parents. You could sense the excitement in the air as we wired it up to the TV, expectant minds impatient to relive glorious memories and heroic deeds.

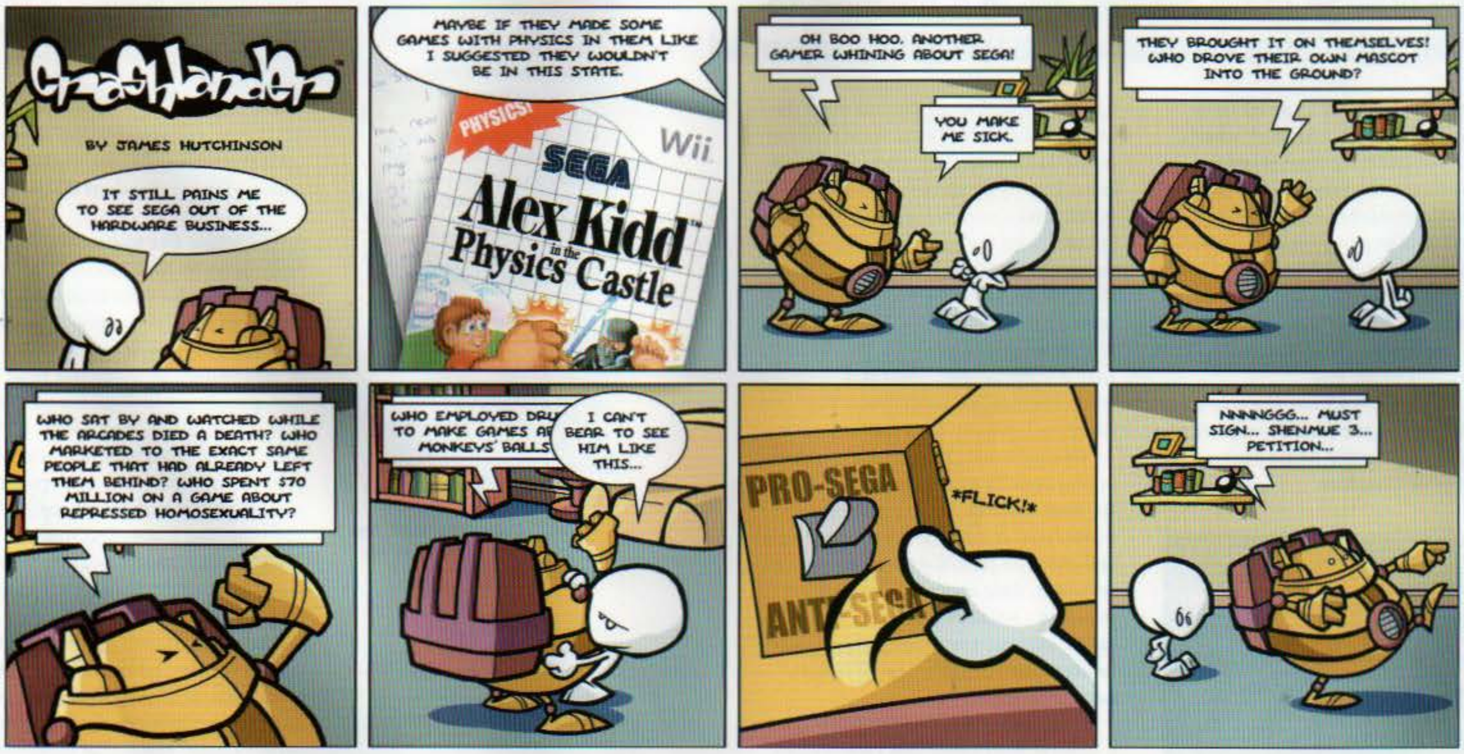
Then we inserted a disc into its drive which made an unpleasant grinding sound and refused to work...

That nearly brought a tear to our eyes.

VastikRoot

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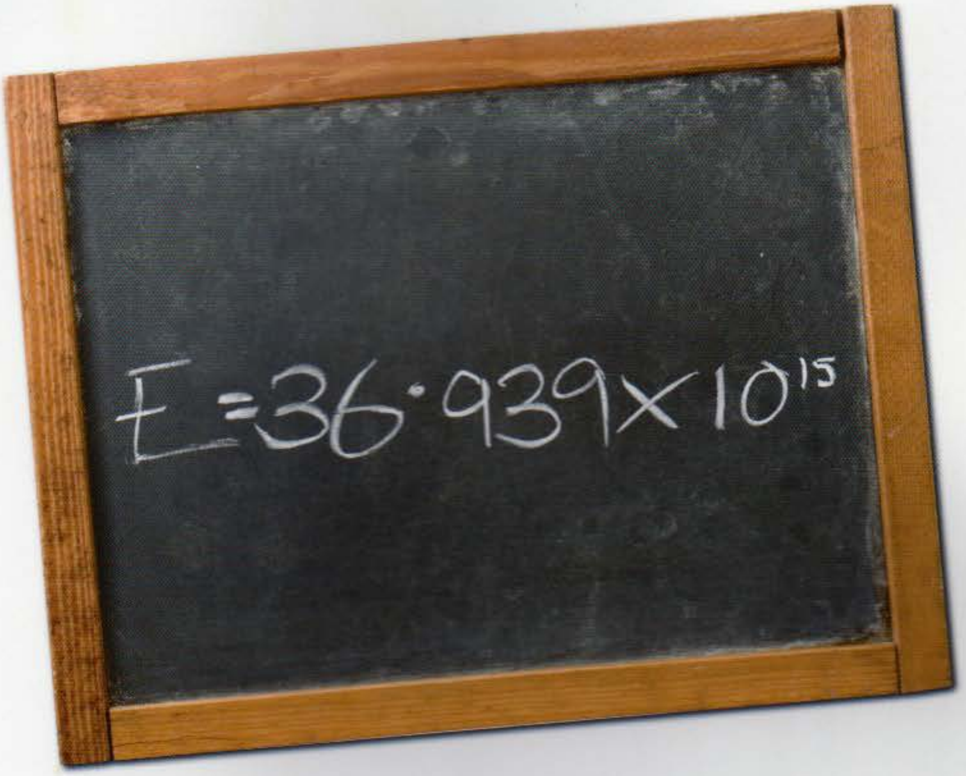


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